CHAPTER ZERO

Medieval Prologue: The Wars of the Roses and Their Antecedents, 1377–1485

Plantagenet Sunset 1377–1399

One hundred years before Bosworth and the accession of Henry VII, at the end of the fourteenth century, England was ruled by kings of the house of Plantagenet. For most of the century, the sovereign had been Edward III (1327–77). One reason he had ruled for so long was that he was, in his day, both popular and successful. This was because he did what medieval English kings were supposed to do: he started a war with France; he got along with his barons; and he sired six sons. But each of these initiatives would be disastrous to his heirs and the people they ruled. For example, the war with France, which came to be known as the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453), began well, but it would prove a significant drain on men and treasure; it would disrupt trade; and it would, naturally, poison Anglo-French relations for decades. This would, in turn, have a catastrophic effect on the power and prestige of the English monarchy.

As for Edward’s good relationship with his barons, it was bought by strengthening their position at the expense of the Crown. For example, he softened the treason laws, making the levying of a private war a mere felony, where previously it had been a capital crime. He agreed to the right of every peer to be summoned to the House of Lords whenever a Parliament met and to be tried by that body rather than any royal court. And finally, he conceded a Parliament’s rights to impeach royal officials on misconduct charges and to demand redress of grievances before voting money for his French wars. In other words, he reduced the power of the English Crown over its nobility and gave Parliament increased opportunities to criticize or hinder royal policy. This was not a great problem for Edward because, for most of his reign, he was able to keep his barons and
Parliaments in line through sheer force of personality. But it meant that some future king, less commanding than he, might find himself in a dangerously weakened position in relation to his mightiest subjects.

The third long-term problem created by Edward III was that he had six sons (see genealogy 1, p. 412). Crowns, like most other forms of property in medieval and early modern England, descended via the eldest son. Additional sons were, apart from their individual personal attractions, a form of insurance for a family: should the eldest line fail, the Crown would simply move to the descendants of the second son, or, failing that line, the third, etc., in turn. But six sons was rather a lot, leaving open the possibility of disputes among them should the eldest line fail. In the case of Edward III that is precisely what happened, though not immediately. His eldest son, Edward, prince of Wales (better known as the Black Prince, 1330–76), predeceased him. However, the Black Prince had a son, who succeeded to the throne as Richard II at his grandfather’s death in 1377.

Richard II (1377–99) was only ten years old at his accession. It was therefore inevitable that the early part of his reign would be dominated by adults, including his uncles, the previous king’s sons, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster (1340–99); Edmund, duke of York (1342–1402); and Thomas, duke of Gloucester (1355–97). It was equally certain that the barons in general and the Parliaments in whose upper house they sat would become more or less used to running the country for the boy-king – but in their own interests. Finally, it stood to reason that when Richard came of age, he would bridle at the power of his barons and Parliaments and seek to break it by promoting men of his own choosing to positions in government. It did not help that Richard’s personality did not fulfill contemporary expectations of a king as his grandfather’s had done: where Edward was boisterous and warlike, Richard was intelligent, sensitive, artistic, and not the least bit interested in renewing his grandfather’s French adventures. Moreover, as his reign wore on, it became clear that he wanted to rule absolutely, without baronial or parliamentary interference. This led to sharp clashes in which powerful men on both sides suffered loss of their lands, imprisonment, and death. In 1399 the king went too far: at the death of his uncle, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, he confiscated Lancaster’s lands so that they would not be inherited by his son, Henry Bolingbroke, earl of Derby and duke of Hereford (1366–1413). This was alarming to many noblemen because, while Bolingbroke had been one of the king’s most active opponents, Lancaster had been loyal. Richard’s actions forced many of his greatest magnates to conclude that their land, too, could be at risk.

Thus, when Bolingbroke, now duke of Lancaster in his own right, returned from exile in France to launch a rebellion in the summer of 1399, he was joined by a number of important Northern families, such as the Percies (led by the earl of Northumberland) and the Nevilles (led by the earl of Westmorland). The ostensible reason for Bolingbroke’s invasion was merely to get his lands back. But when it became apparent that Richard had no support among the barons, and that his army had deserted him, the new duke of Lancaster, with his grandfather
Edward III’s royal blood coursing through his veins, began to contemplate the Crown. In August, Bolingbroke accepted Richard’s surrender, took him to the capital, and imprisoned him in the Tower of London. Once in prison, Richard, fearing for his life, agreed to abdicate. Bolingbroke summoned a Parliament to hear Richard's deed of abdication and the thirty-three charges against him on September 30. Once these had been read, the duke stepped forward to claim the Crown. The reign of King Henry IV, the founder of the house of Lancaster, had begun.

There are many lessons for subsequent kings here. First, no matter what the king’s claim to the throne, to maintain that claim and to be an effective ruler generally, he had to be perceived as strong, like Edward III: Richard’s failure to pursue an aggressive military policy in France hurt his prestige and removed any sense of fear that his barons might have harbored. Second, a successful king had to develop a workable – if not necessarily friendly – relationship with those barons. After all, thanks to feudalism, many aristocrats possessed land, money, and armies of retainers, known as affinities. These were useful to the king when he wished to wage a foreign war, as Edward III had done. But when the nation was at peace with its neighbors, they represented a force (or, really, many forces) for domestic instability: they might be used against other aristocrats in disputes over property; or, when that property was threatened by the monarch, they might be used against him. Third, we should note the power that Parliaments had already achieved as early as the late fourteenth century: after all, Henry IV won the Crown through force of arms, but he claimed it in Parliament. By this time, the Crown had come to accept that only Parliaments could authorize taxation; that they could present petitions and seek redress of grievances by enacting statutes; that only statutes approved by both Houses had the force of law; that they could withhold taxation until the king had approved those statutes; and that they could examine how monies so voted were spent. Significantly, though baronial factions often dominated Parliaments, when any one faction sought to remake the English constitution it did so through parliamentary legislation. A fourth significance of these events was that a king, once deposed, remains a source of loyalty for anyone dissatisfied with the new regime. Thus, he cannot be allowed to live free by his usurpers. In late 1399–1400 there were a number of isolated rebellions initiated by Richard's followers against King Henry. These were put down easily, but they convinced Henry to imprison Richard in Pontefract Castle and, almost certainly, to have him killed. Legend has it that Richard starved to death, but the evidence is inconclusive. In any case, he was dead by mid-February 1400.

Finally, it should be obvious that these events violated the Great Chain of Being: God's lieutenant, Richard II, had been deposed by his inferior in the Chain. Contemporaries must have wondered whether God would take vengeance on those who had compassed this act. Years later, in his play The Tragedy of King Richard II, William Shakespeare would recall its consequences by having the bishop of Carlisle address the Parliament that deposed Richard in these words:
What subject can give sentence on his king?
And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject?
Thieves are not judged, but they are by to hear,
Although apparent guilt be seen in them;
And shall the figure of God’s majesty,
Anointed, crownéd, planted many years,
Be judged by subject and inferior breath,
And he himself not present?¹ O, forfend it, God,
That, in a Christian climate, souls refined
Should show so heinous, black, obscene a deed!
I speak to subjects, and a subject speaks,
Stirred up by God, thus boldly for his king.
My Lord of Hereford [i.e., Henry] here, whom you call king,
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford’s king;
And if you crown him, let me prophesy,
The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act . . .;
O if you raise this house against this house,
It will the woefullest division prove,
That ever fell upon this cursed earth.
Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,
Lest child, child’s children, cry against you – woe!

(Richard II 4.1)

While the first half of this speech is based fairly closely on what the bishop of Carlisle actually said in Parliament in 1399, the prediction at the end is the playwright’s invention. Shakespeare, writing a hundred years after these events, knew, of course, that the prediction would come true. The speech is therefore not so much an accurate exposition of what was generally thought at the time of Richard’s dethronement as it is a reflection of how English men and women came to feel about that event under the Tudors. Still, Richard’s contemporaries would have recognized the argument: deposing a king violated the universe’s fundamental order (the Great Chain of Being) and so invited God’s wrath, most tangibly expressed in political and social anarchy. In short, no matter how bad a king Richard may have seemed to his people, no matter how reasonable Henry Bolingbroke’s position, his usurpation set in motion processes and problems which were bound to have dire consequences for the realm as a whole.

The House of Lancaster 1399–1461

Henry IV (1399–1413) began his reign under the cloud of usurpation and, no matter what he did to dispel that cloud, it overshadowed all that he tried to accomplish. He was able, intelligent, even cagy, well educated, and a good soldier. But poor health and an uncertain title to the throne hampered his rule. Because his main source of support was neither divine sanction nor hereditary right, but, rather, Parliaments and the barons who had sided with him against Richard, the
ruling elite tended to feel that he owed them power and land in return. Henry only encouraged these feelings at the beginning of his reign by making lavish grants of lands, pensions, and gifts to his barons in an attempt to buy that support. Parliament members criticized his household expenditure and his gifts to favorites, and contrasted these with his failure to defend the English coast against French pirates. In fact, his Parliaments had voted very little money to do so, and sought to oversee how he spent even that. This, combined with the decline of the yield from the wool Customs, precluded more aggressive military maneuvers such as a renewal of the war with France.

Worse, in the fall of 1400 a Welsh gentleman named Owen Glendower (ca. 1354–ca. 1416), chafing under the domination of the Marcher Lords, rebelled. In 1403 the uprising was joined by two important Northern English families: the Percies, who had previously supported Henry, and the Mortimers. Glendower, seeking French support as well and styling himself prince of Wales, planned to divide the kingdom with them. Henry’s armies defeated this coalition at the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403, but related isolated rebellions continued to 1408.6 Henry IV, sickly, listless, and dispirited, became a caretaker king, having to compete with his charismatic and aggressive son, Prince Hal (1387–1422). In 1411–12 he asserted himself one last time and purged his son’s followers from office, which briefly led the prince to threaten rebellion. In October 1412 a reconciliation was arranged – but the new reign had practically begun.

In 1413, Henry IV died and was succeeded by Hal, who became King Henry V (1413–22). The new king presented a marked contrast to the old. He was twenty-five years old, dynamic, brave, charismatic, and coldly logical. Even more than his great grandfather, Edward III, contemporaries saw him as a model king. Modern observers have tended to see him as ruthless, hypocritical, sanctimonious, and a warmonger – which is to say that modern values are different from those of his contemporaries. In his defense, it must be said that he inherited a raft of problems from his father’s usurpation and reign, and an institution – the English monarchy – which was at a relatively low ebb of prestige and power, both at home and abroad. He attempted to solve these problems by pursuing the time-honored solution of distracting attention away from them and toward a common enemy. That is, he renewed the Hundred Years’ War with France.

Fortunately for Henry, if England had grown weak and disunited after the death of Edward III, its ancient enemy was in even worse shape. France was ruled at the beginning of the fifteenth century by Charles VI (1380–1422), who had declined into madness. Two great noble families, those of the dukes of Burgundy and of Orléans, fought over real power. Henry V chose to support the Burgundians, who were also ranged against the king of France. Henry embarked in August 1415 with 10,000 men under the command of his leading nobles. The war appealed to them because it promised glory, plunder, and French land. Their participation appealed to Henry because it allowed him to keep an eye on them and it gave them all a common enemy who was not him. The campaign culminated on October 25, 1415 in a brilliant victory of English infantry over a much larger force of French cavalry at Agincourt in northwestern France (see map 5, p. 35). The battle went down in
English legend, helping to create a myth of the English as brave and victorious underdogs. The myth would be recalled in 1588 when the Spanish Armada threatened invasion; in 1805 when the French did so at Trafalgar; and in 1940 when the Germans tried the same thing in the Battle of Britain. Indeed, from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century, when England’s role in Europe was minimal and often ineffectual, Agincourt stood as a reminder of what an aggressive and well-led English military force could do on the continent.

Of more immediate importance, the victory at Agincourt led Parliament to grant more money for the next campaign. And so, with a much strengthened army, Henry V returned to northwestern France in 1417. He and his ally, Burgundy, captured town after town. The latter entered Paris in May 1418. In 1420, Charles VI agreed to the Treaty of Troyes: Henry was to marry Charles’s daughter, Katherine (1401–37), and be recognized as the heir to his throne—this despite the prior existence of Charles’s son, also named Charles (1403–61)! In fact, the central and southern provinces of France remained loyal to the dauphin (as the French Crown prince was always called), which led Henry to prepare another campaign for 1421. But on this campaign, while besieging the city of Mieus, Henry V contracted dysentery and died.

This brought to the English throne an infant of nine months, the only offspring of Henry V and Queen Katherine: Henry VI (1422–61). It is a great measure of the posthumous respect accorded to the memory of his father that he succeeded at all, given the example of the last such royal minority, that of Richard II. As with that unfortunate king, it was inevitable that the early years of Henry VI’s reign would be dominated by his nobility and, in particular, his relatives. But, in fact, the king’s age was to make little difference to the quality of his rule or lives of his subjects. Even after declaring himself of age in 1437, he proved to be a pious, docile, weak-minded nonentity. Eventually, he went insane. Even before he did so, he was dominated by family and courtiers: first his mother, Queen Katherine; then his great uncles descended from John of Gaunt, the Beauforts, led by Henry, Cardinal Beaufort (1374–1447), and successive dukes of Somerset; and finally from 1544 his wife, Margaret of Anjou (1430–82). They advised him to pursue peace with France; but they were best known for aggrandizing power and draining the royal Treasury for their own benefit. Early in the reign they were opposed at court by another of the king’s uncles—and thus another descendant of Edward III—Humphrey, duke of Gloucester (ca. 1390–1447). Gloucester urged continuing pressure on France—and abandonment of the greedy Beaufort family. But in 1441 the duchess of Gloucester was accused of witchcraft against the king, which served to discredit the duke. Six years later, he himself was accused of treason and died in custody.

The war would come back to haunt Henry VI and the Beauforts anyway. In 1422 Charles VI died, leaving the child, Henry, king of both England and France. Charles, the dauphin, spent most of the rest of the 1420s on the run from the English. This left him, understandably, apathetic and disheartened. However, during that same decade, a French peasant girl named Joan of Arc (1412–31) began to experience religious visions which convinced her that it was her duty to
save the French monarchy and drive the English out of France. In 1429 she led an army which relieved a siege at Orléans (see map 5, p. 35) and began to drive the English back elsewhere. By the end of the next year Joan had been captured by the duke of Burgundy and sold to the English, who burned her as a heretic. But Charles VII (1422–61) had been crowned king of France at Reims. From this point on, he began to be a focus for French nationalism, and forced the English, now under the duke of Bedford (yet another royal uncle; 1389–1435), to fight a rearguard action. In 1435, the Burgundians, seeing the writing on the wall, abandoned their English allies. In 1436, Paris fell back into French hands. By 1450 the French had driven the English out of Normandy; by 1453, virtually out of France. What had once been an English overseas empire on the continent was reduced to the solitary Channel port of Calais (map 5). The French had won the Hundred Years’ War. The loser was to be Henry VI and the house of Lancaster.

The Hundred Years’ War produced a unified France under a single acknowledged king. But it destabilized the English monarchy and economy, discredited the house of Lancaster, and divided the English nobility. That is, it led to the Wars of the Roses. Remember that the Lancastrians had come to the Crown not through lawful descent, but through force of arms. Now their military skills had proved inadequate. Moreover, the wars against France had been very expensive and ruinous to trade. In 1450 the Crown’s debts were £372,000 and its income but £36,000 a year, a sobering decline from an annual revenue of £120,000 in the reign of Richard II. The House of Commons refused to increase taxes, knowing that the revenue would go either to a losing war effort or to line Beaufort pockets. Since royal revenue was not keeping up with expenditure, the king could only pay for military affairs by borrowing large sums at exorbitant interest rates. As one critic said of Henry VI in 1450: “[his] law is lost, his merchandise is lost; his commons are destroyed. The sea is lost; France is lost; himself is made so poor that he may not pay for his meat or drink; he oweth more and [is] greater in debt than ever was King in England.”

Given an incompetent king, a corrupt and inefficient government, a failed war effort, and a wrecked economy, it was perhaps inevitable that the nobility would begin to question Lancastrian rule. Their vast affinities enabled them to do more than question. The most prominent of these critics was Richard, duke of York (1411–60). York was a direct descendant of Edward III’s fifth son, Duke Edmund. Through his mother, Anne Mortimer (d. 1412), he inherited the blood of Edward’s third son, Lionel, duke of Clarence (1338–68), and the claim of the Mortimer family (see genealogy 1, p. 412). In short, he could make nearly as good a claim to the throne as its present, Lancastrian, occupant. Moreover, he was the greatest landowner in England, which provided him with immense wealth and made him head of the largest affinity in the realm. Finally, he was allied by marriage to the powerful Neville family. None of this is to say that York easily or quickly formed a design to seize the throne. Rather, he began the reign as a loyal servant of the Crown who, like many nobles, found himself frozen out of royal favor by the Beauforts. When, in the 1450s, Henry VI began to decline into madness, the court into corruption, and the country into economic depression,
York and his followers began to challenge Queen Margaret, the Beauforts, and their leader the duke of Somerset for office, influence, and power at court. That fight turned violent in 1455 when the duke of York and his allies, the Nevilles, raised their affinities, and defeated and killed Somerset at the battle of St. Albans, Hertfordshire (see map 4, p. 34). After St. Albans, York was named lord protector of England, but the Beaufort faction was by no means destroyed. Both sides bid their time, maneuvered for advantage, and prepared for further hostilities: the Wars of the Roses had begun. 4

They resumed in the fall of 1459, and lasted for two years. After a series of engagements which saw each side claim victories, the crucial turning point came when Richard Neville, earl of Warwick (1428–71), the commander of the Calais garrison, reentered the fray. Warwick had supported the Yorkists but had been forced to flee in October after losing the battle of Ludford Bridge, Shropshire (map 4), following which Parliament attained Warwick and a number of Yorkist peers. In June of 1460 he returned with his troops and helped turn the tide against the Lancastrians. The next month, the Yorkists defeated the king's forces at Northampton, Northamptonshire, and Richard, duke of York, formally laid claim to the Crown. However, in December, Richard's army was defeated at Wakefield, Yorkshire (map 4), and he was killed. His son, Edward (1442–83), now became duke of York. At this point the Lancastrians had the advantage, and Queen Margaret marched on London. However, the city, perhaps angry at the state of trade, certainly alarmed at stories of the rapacity of her army, closed its gates to her. Rather, on March 4, 1461 the citizens of London and members of the nobility acclaimed the duke of York as King Edward IV. That claim was finally made good at the end of the month in a seven-hour mêlée during a blinding snowstorm at Towton Moor, Yorkshire (map 4). At the end of it, the Lancastrian army lay defeated and Edward returned to London in triumph. The reign of King Edward IV and the house of York (1461–83) had begun.

The House of York 1461–1485

The Yorkists won not because Edward’s claim to the throne was stronger than Henry’s, but because Henry was a weak and unsuccessful king. The country’s leading citizens were sick of defeat abroad, expensive and corrupt government at home, and vindictive Lancastrian measures against Yorkists. Nevertheless, most nobles pursued a “wait and see” policy on the new reign. King Edward faced massive obstacles if he was to rehabilitate the image of the English monarchy. First, Lancastrian incompetence, cruelty, and greed had besmirched not only that line’s reputation, but the very office of sovereign itself. Moreover, by losing the French lands, driving the Crown into debt, and using Parliament to pursue political vendettas, they had weakened the monarchy constitutionally. Worse, the confusion of the previous decade over rival claims to the throne had also weakened the principle of hereditary succession. Finally, it should be remembered that the Yorkists had profited from the fact that for over a decade great noble
affinities had made war on the king and on each other with near impunity. As was
the case after the fall of Richard II, it might not be so easy to get them out of the
habit. Some, such as Warwick (who was being called “kingmaker”), might feel
that the new king owed them much more than lands and favor, as had happened
to Henry IV.

Fortunately for the new regime, Edward IV was, on balance, a good choice to
restore the prestige of monarchy and to establish the new line. Unlike Henry VI,
had he a commanding presence: tall, handsome, approachable, and a natty
dresser. These qualities may seem superficial, but they should never be underesti-
mated. The first requirement of the new king—and of any head of State—was that
he look and act like one. Henry VI had been criticized, among many other failings,
for his shabby dress and unregal appearance. Edward, moreover, loved
to participate in elaborate processions, and to encourage a brilliant and entertain-
ing court. But his high living had a darker side. He could be lazy and was
something of a womanizer. The former meant that he often relied on his brother,
Richard, duke of Gloucester (1452–85), or his confidant, William, Lord Hastings
(ca. 1430–83), to get things done. His love of women may explain his marriage in
1464 to the beautiful Elizabeth Woodville (ca. 1436–92), who came from an
otherwise obscure family. The marriage was highly controversial in Yorkist circles
because it wrecked Warwick’s attempts to negotiate a diplomatic marriage with a
French princess. Moreover, Edward’s attempt to raise the Woodvilles’ prestige by
showering them with favor did nothing for his relations with other peers, like
Warwick, who had longer and more distinguished records of Yorkist allegiance.

These cracks in the Yorkist affinity were all the more alarming because the
Lancastrian threat remained. The late king, Henry, was very much at large until
1465, when he was captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London. His queen,
Margaret, remained free in Scotland and had powerful allies in France who
sheltered their son, the young Prince Edward (1453–71). And for many Lancas-
trian noblemen, in Wales and the North, especially, the Wars of the Roses were
not over. In 1469 Warwick, joined by the king’s other brother, George, duke of
Clarence (1449–78), rebelled; in the fall of 1470 they went further, joining with
Queen Margaret and King Louis XI (1461–83) of France in an attempt to liberate
and reinstate Henry VI. The invasion forced King Edward to flee to the Nether-
lands and restored Henry, temporarily, to his throne. But Edward returned in the
following year and, supported once again by the fickle Clarence, defeated and
slew Warwick on Easter Sunday (April 14) at the battle of Barnet, in Hertford-
shire (see map 4, p. 34). Two weeks later the Yorkist forces caught up with,
defeated, and killed Henry’s son, Prince Edward, at Tewkesbury, in Gloucester-
shire (map 4). A few weeks after that, the recently recaptured Henry died,
supposedly “of pure displeasure and melancholy.”

It is, of course, much more likely that he was murdered in the Tower on or about May 21, 1471.6

The ever-present threat of Lancastrian revival obscured the fact that Edward’s
reign had many solid achievements. Most historians credit him with doing a great
deal to restore monarchical power and prestige, and Henry VII would copy or
extend many of his policies. First, he revived royal financial health by conserving
the estates which he brought to the Crown as duke of York, by confiscating the estates of his enemies (including the vast Duchy of Lancaster), by reviving old feudal laws which allowed him to resume lands at the deaths of their owners, and, during the second half of his reign at least, by refusing to give lands away to favorites and courtiers as the Lancastrians had done. Edward also increased his yield from Customs, first, by supervising the collectors more closely and, second, by pursuing peace with France, which promoted the recovery of international trade. As a result, he rarely had to ask Parliament for funds. This, in turn, weakened Parliament's leverage over the king.

Edward IV not only restored English governmental finances; he took measures to restore its reputation for efficiency, fairness, and honesty, as well. While it is true that he concentrated power in the hands of a few great peers (Warwick, Gloucester, Hastings), below this level he appointed men to sensitive positions who were neither barons nor favorites, but professionals and members of the gentry who could get the job done. His council included knights, gentlemen, judges, and attorneys, not just landed magnates. These kinds of individuals had two advantages over his more powerful subjects. First, none of them could grow so wealthy or powerful as to pose a challenge to his rule. Second, they gave the council practical expertise in the raising and prudent spending of money.

When old institutions could not be revitalized, Edward and his advisers invented new ones. For example, he encouraged the council to meet as a court of law in a room at Westminster Palace known for its ceiling decoration as the Star Chamber. The court of Star Chamber was more efficient than other courts because it did not have years of tradition – or many privileges for the accused – to get in the way of swift deliberation. This reminds us that an increase in royal power often came at the expense of individual rights. Edward also created a Council of the Marches of Wales to manage royal lands (and, later, to enforce law and order) in that sometimes rebellious region. He also used his personal secretary, who became an embryonic secretary of State, and his servants in the royal household to execute policy when the officers he inherited from the Lancastrians in the official government chain of command proved recalcitrant or disloyal. These policies had several effects. First, they increased the power and efficiency of the Crown and reduced that of his “over-mighty” noble subjects. Second, they revived the popularity of the monarchy by restoring peace and good government. This was especially appreciated by the middling orders, such as merchants and lawyers.

Unfortunately, Edward still had much work to do when his health began to fail, it was said because of his penchant for high living, in the early 1480s. He died, worn out before his time, at the age of forty on April 9, 1483. This brought to the throne his son, a boy of twelve who ascended as Edward V (1483). Edward V reigned only briefly and never ruled. Like all boy-kings, his realm was to be administered for him by a regency council dominated by his uncles, among whom there was, unfortunately, no love lost. In other words, while Edward IV had given power to his relatives, he had never molded them into a team. This was to have disastrous consequences. The most prominent royal relative was the late king's
brother, Richard, duke of Gloucester. Gloucester realized at the outset that the
house of York sat precariously and that all of the hard-won gains of the last reign
were jeopardized by the king’s youth. How could a twelve-year-old boy preserve
his throne and line against future Lancastrian rebellions? Moreover, Edward’s
other uncles from the Woodville side of the family threatened Gloucester’s own
position as head of the regency council. That is, Gloucester saw two threats: one
external, to Yorkist rule, from the Lancastrian house and nobility; the other
internal, to him, from the late king’s in-laws.

Gloucester solved his in-law problem first. At the late king’s death, Edward,
prince of Wales, was living with Anthony, Earl Rivers (1442–83), one of his
Woodville uncles in Wales; Gloucester was holding down the North for his
brother. As the news of Edward IV’s demise penetrated into the countryside,
young Edward, accompanied by Rivers, began to move east toward London to
claim his kingdom. Gloucester began to move south, along the way striking an
alliance with Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham (1455–83). Buckingham was
not only one of the wealthiest and most powerful landowners in England; he was
also yet another descendant of Edward III. This party intercepted the king in the
Midlands on April 30 and had Rivers arrested on a charge of plotting against
Gloucester. Gloucester’s in-law problem was solved: he had neutralized the
Woodvilles and he alone controlled the new king. On May 4 Edward, Gloucester,
and Buckingham entered London to the cheers of its populace. The council,
dominated by Gloucester’s allies, accepted his charge of a Woodville plot and
declared him protector of the realm.

But none of these dramatic actions did anything to solve the duke of Glouce-
ster’s Lancastrian problem – or to satisfy his own ambitions. Historians will never
know Gloucester’s precise motives for the actions he took next – though common
sense suggests that they speak for themselves. In June 1483, he struck. At a
council sitting on the 13th to plan Edward’s coronation, he had the old king’s
lord chamberlain and adviser, Lord Hastings, arrested and beheaded without
trial. With Hastings out of the way, Gloucester’s allies were able to suggest that
Edward IV, famous for his sexual escapades, had promised to marry another
woman before his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville. This assertion, if true, would
invalidate the Woodville marriage; render King Edward V and his younger
brother, Richard, duke of York (1472–83), illegitimate; and leave the duke of
Gloucester the true Yorkist heir to the throne. Parliament, acting on this sugges-
tion – and possibly fearing the consequences of rule by a small boy – declared the
late king’s marriage invalid. The duke of Gloucester was crowned King Richard
III (1483–5) on July 6, 1483.

This still left the problem of his two nephews, Edward and Richard, currently
housed in the Tower of London. Defenders of Richard like to point out that the
Tower was, in those days, a royal palace as well as a royal prison. But it was
almost never used as the former. As July faded into August, the two princes were
seen less and less playing in the Tower grounds and, finally, they were no longer
seen at all. This led historians for many years to claim that Richard had the two
boys murdered, as portrayed in Thomas More’s History of Richard III and
Shakespeare’s play which was based on it. During renovations in 1674 two skeletons were found which were assumed to be those of Edward and Richard and so were given royal burial. Forensic examination of the remains in 1933 suggested that their respective physical development was consistent with the ages of the two princes in 1483. While none of this proves Richard’s guilt, he remains the most likely suspect. Still, alternative suspects have been suggested. The ambitious duke of Buckingham, who would, before the year was out, launch his own attempt at the Crown, was constable of the Tower and so had opportunity. Others have suggested the more far-fetched possibility that the two princes lived peacefully in the Tower until the accession of Henry VII two years later, upon which he had them murdered. The question of who murdered the little princes in the Tower remains one of the great murder mysteries in English history, and will almost certainly never be solved. In fact, there may not have been a murder at all. Contemporary chroniclers report that Prince Edward was ill of fever in July 1483. It is quite possible that the two young men, living in the damp confines of the Tower, succumbed to natural causes. This would explain the new king’s failure to address their situation publicly or produce their persons for display.

In any case, the ruthless methods by which Richard ascended the throne divided the Yorkist affinity and could not have produced a favorable impression among his subjects. He spent the remainder of his reign seeking to prove that he really wasn’t such a bad guy after all. In fact, Richard III was not the hunchbacked monster portrayed in subsequent Tudor propaganda, including the works of More and Shakespeare. He had proven himself able and courageous during the Wars of the Roses. He was intelligent and cultured and prudent enough to continue his brother’s policies. His Parliaments passed enlightened legislation favorable to trade and the economy. The Tudors even exaggerated his physical problems: he seems to have had one shoulder slightly higher than the other, no more.

But the bloody opening of his reign besmirched the Yorkist cause and the tenuosity of his own claim to the throne encouraged others to try for the main prize. In late 1483 he put down a revolt by his erstwhile ally, Buckingham. The duke paid for his gamble, as did most failed would-be kings in this period, with his head. In the summer of 1485, Richard faced another revolt, this time by a Welsh nobleman with only the most tenuous of Lancastrian claims, Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond (1457–1509). His father was Edmund Tudor, earl of Richmond (ca. 1430–56), a powerful Welsh landowner and the son of Queen Katherine, Henry V’s widow, by her second husband, Owen Tudor (d. 1461), who was not of royal blood at all. His mother was Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509), a direct, but female, descendant of Edward III’s third son, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, by his mistress, Katherine Swynford (1350–1403; see genealogies 1 and 2, pp. 412–13). This tortuous link to royal blood provided a weaker claim than King Richard’s; indeed, one not much stronger than that of about half-a-dozen other English peers. Nevertheless, when the Lancastrian cause collapsed in 1471, Richmond had been forced into exile, in Brittany. There, he bided his time and attempted to shore up support among the Lancastrian nobility.
In August 1485 he returned, landing with perhaps 2,000 supporters at Milford Haven, in Wales. As with the revolt of Henry Bolingbroke nearly a century earlier, important noble families flocked to his side not so much because of loyalty to him as dissatisfaction with a ruthless and, in this case, usurper king. The rival armies met at Bosworth Field, Leicestershire, on August 22, 1485. Richard found out just how weak his support was when, soon after the opening of battle, the powerful Stanley family and their followers deserted for Richmond’s side. Indeed, it was actually a party of Stanley retainers who killed the king after he had been unhorsed in a brave but desperate charge of Henry’s bodyguard. The sun of the house of York had set; the day belonged to the house of Richmond – or, as historians refer to it, the house of Tudor.

Notes

1 Richard had been led away and so was not present in the House of Lords for this event.
2 Glendower was never captured, but his rebellion petered out and he disappeared by about 1410, becoming a legendary figure of Welsh national pride thereafter.
4 The term “Wars of the Roses” is a nineteenth-century invention, unknown to Henry’s contemporaries. There is a scene in Shakespeare’s Henry VI, Part 1 in which two prominent characters pluck roses of different colors to show their allegiances. But Shakespeare was, remember, writing more than a century after the fact. It is true that one of the symbols of one side, the Yorkists, was the white rose. But the red rose only became associated with the Lancastrians and Tudors later. The term “Wars of the Roses” was coined by the nineteenth-century novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott.
6 This was also the fate of the king’s inconsistently loyal brother, Clarence. In 1478 he was arrested on a charge of witchcraft against the king. He was taken to the Tower and never seen again. Legend and Shakespeare have it that he was there drowned in a butt of Malmsey wine.
7 Along with the murder of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey (see chapter 9, p. 282), the identity of Jack the Ripper in 1888, and, perhaps, the death of Amy, Lady Dudley (see chapter 4, p. 116).