Tracy Borman

Crown + Sceptre

Henry VII (1485–1509)

'Suspicious of everything'

England's first Tudor monarch was born at Pembroke Castle in Wales on 28 January 1457 to the thirteen-year-old Lady Margaret Beaufort. She had been a widow for almost three months, her husband Edmund Tudor having died of a sudden illness. Intensely pious and formidably ambitious, Lady Margaret doted upon her son from the beginning and saw him as the chief hope of the beleaguered Lancastrian dynasty.

To say that Henry Tudor's path to the throne had been a tortuous one would be an understatement. Having fled Wales when Edward IV seized back the crown in 1471, he had spent most of the next fourteen years as an outcast in Brittany under threat of arrest and execution. Upon finally returning to Wales in a bid to wrest the throne from Richard III in August 1485, his ragtag army of mercenaries had been far outnumbered by those of the king. And yet, as his indomitable mother had confidently predicted, God had smiled upon his endeavours and he was now King Henry VII of England. For how long was anyone's guess.

During the previous two years, the crown had changed hands three times, so it seemed only a matter of time before a rival claimant would oust this latest incumbent, particularly as Henry's bloodline did not bear close scrutiny. His mother was descended from Edward III, but in an illegitimate line. Although the Beauforts had subsequently been legitimised, in 1407 Henry IV had declared that they should not be allowed to inherit the crown. This, and the stain of bastardy, made Henry's right to the throne more tenuous than any King of England since William the Conqueror. At the time of his accession, there were no fewer than eighteen

claimants with a superior right to the throne to his – including his prospective wife, Elizabeth of York.[1]

The new Tudor king was not without merit, though. Polydore Vergil described him as 'extremely attractive in appearance', with a 'slim, but well-built and strong' figure, above the average height, and a 'cheerful', animated face. More importantly, Henry had the shrewdness and political guile to succeed. John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, who knew the king well, had nothing but praise for him: 'His wisdom in governance, was singular, his wit always quick and ready . . . his person goodly and amiable . . . his dealings in time of perils and dangers was cold and sober with great hardiness.'[2]

Two months after his triumph at Bosworth, Henry VII was crowned at Westminster Abbey. Anxious to bolster his legitimacy, he used the occasion to emphasise the continuity of the succession. The ceremony was based upon Edward IV's, and Henry also commissioned Edward's Parisian tailor, George Lovekyn, to make his coronation robes. Henry retained Lovekyn as his tailor thereafter and always took care to dress in Plantagenet fashions, rather than those of the Breton or French court. He lavished huge expense on his wardrobe during the early years of his reign, and visitors to court were impressed by his 'splendidly generous' hospitality.[3] For a king who later became notorious as a miser, it was worth the expense. The credibility of Henry's kingship rested upon such external shows.

Shortly after his coronation, Henry's first Parliament was convened. Conscious of the need to strengthen the new king's regime, it formally invited him to take Elizabeth of York as his bride. According to Vergil, Elizabeth declared herself an 'unhappy creature' at being 'united with a man who is the enemy of my family'.[4] But her royal upbringing had taught her that duty came ahead of personal desire and the marriage was celebrated on 18 January 1486. The houses of Lancaster and York were united at last. Just eight months later, the union was strengthened by the birth of a prince, Arthur. The choice of name was significant: Henry VII had commissioned a family tree showing his descent from the legendary King Arthur.

The ending of the Wars of the Roses that Henry's marriage symbolised was expressed in other ways. Although he appointed a

close circle of Lancastrian advisers and servants, such as Sir Reynold Bray and Richard Fox, he also retained a significant number of officials from Edward IV's time. They included John Morton, formerly Bishop of Ely, who was promoted to the hallowed position of Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor. Even some nobles who had fought on Richard's side at Bosworth were gradually allowed back into favour. The Tudor propaganda machine also got to work. Throughout the palaces, the emblem of entwined red and white roses was scattered. It was also on prominent display in court pageantry and featured in the poetry that was published during the new reign. The Tudor rose is still one of the most instantly recognisable symbols of monarchy today.

Henry VII soon learned that the divisions of the past were not so easily healed. It is telling that when embarking upon the first progress of his reign, he appointed an armed bodyguard to accompany him. While he turned a smiling face to the pageants that lined his processional route through the Midlands and south-west, he was inwardly disturbed by news of risings in Yorkshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Without a figurehead, these rebellions were quickly suppressed.

But in early 1487, Henry faced a more serious threat. In Ireland, a young man claiming to be Edward, Earl of Warwick, son of Edward IV's brother George, Duke of Clarence, had won so much support that he had been proclaimed king. Henry VII had taken the precaution of placing Warwick in the Tower at the beginning of his reign. But the supporters of the 'pretender' (whose real name was Lambert Simnel) claimed that he had escaped. The plot quickly attracted members of the powerful Yorkist fraternity. The queen's own mother, Elizabeth Woodville, was suspected of involvement. Meanwhile, John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, nephew of Edward IV and Richard III, fled to the Netherlands to join his aunt Margaret of York, dowager Duchess of Burgundy. With Margaret's help, he began gathering men and arms to launch an invasion in Warwick's name.

Pole landed in Ireland with 2,000 mercenaries supplied by his aunt and saw the pretender crowned Edward VI in Dublin on 24 May. Thousands of Irish troops now fled to his cause, and two weeks later Simnel's army landed off the Cumbrian coast. He marched

through the northern counties, amassing more support from Ricardians hostile to the new Tudor regime. Although the pretender's army was impressive, the king had assembled one twice as large and far better equipped. When the two sides met at East Stoke, near Newark, on 16 June, Simnel's troops were defeated. Among the casualties was John de la Pole, which removed another rival claimant from Henry's path. It had been an easy victory and the king was merciful to those who had taken part. He even pardoned Simnel himself and set him to work in the royal kitchens as a spit-turner. But the whole episode had left the new king with a profound sense of unease.

Resolved to strengthen his hold on the crown, in November 1487 Henry arranged the coronation of his queen. Just a month later, another conspiracy was uncovered – this time within his own household. Realising that the new King of England sat unsteadily on his throne, his international rivals began circling like vultures. Among them was the newly crowned King of Scots, James IV, who soon began dabbling in Yorkist conspiracies.

Desperate for allies, in February 1489, Henry agreed a treaty with the Duchess of Brittany, promising military assistance against the King of France in return for support for any attempts he might make to reassert English rights across the Channel. The same month, Henry concluded an alliance with the Archduke of Austria, Maximilian I, and in March he signed the Treaty of Medina del Campo with the joint monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella. The latter included the promise of a marriage between their daughter, Catherine of Aragon, and Prince Arthur. All of this constituted an impressive diplomatic achievement, one that greatly strengthened Henry's kingship.

Towards the end of 1489, the Tudor dynasty was strengthened by the birth of Henry and Elizabeth's second child, Princess Margaret. Her elder brother Arthur was created Prince of Wales the following day amid great ceremony. Less than a year later, the queen was pregnant again. But as Elizabeth began her confinement at Greenwich, her husband was preoccupied with the threat from another pretender to his throne.

Perkin Warbeck was a young man, possibly of Flemish descent, who claimed to be Richard, Duke of York, the younger of the princes in the Tower. Like Simnel, he won the support of Margaret of Burgundy, who formally recognised him as her nephew, and he had strong backing in Ireland. More worrying for Henry was that there were many in England willing to pledge their allegiance to him. Vergil observed: 'The rumour of Richard, the resuscitated Duke of York, had divided nearly all England into factions, filling the minds of men with hope or fear.'[5] Despite all the king's efforts to secure his realm, the old antipathies between York and Lancaster that had torn the country apart for so many years looked set to be revived.

On 28 June 1491, the king received the welcome news that his wife had been delivered of a son, who was named after his father. But there were soon far gloomier tidings of Warbeck's growing support. He had been honourably received by a host of continental rulers, including Charles VIII, King of France and Philip of Habsburg, Duke of Burgundy. Even Henry's erstwhile ally, Maximilian, showed him favour by inviting him to the funeral of his father, Emperor Frederick III, and recognising him as King Richard IV of England.

The pretender was quietly winning support closer to home, too. From early 1493, some of Henry's most senior courtiers were drawn into the plot, including Sir William Stanley, who had secured victory for him at Bosworth. As yet, the king did not know the identity of Warbeck's supporters at court, but he was alarmed enough to overhaul the staffing and structure of his privy chamber, reducing its members to just six and ensuring that it was closely guarded at all times. Henry's first biographer, Francis Bacon, describes how the king was intent upon 'keeping of distance . . . not admitting any near or full approach, either to his power or to his secrets'.[6] As well as making the monarch less accessible, this new 'institutionalised distance' established greater rigour and ritual around his appearances in public.[7] As a result, his courtiers fought more fiercely for the king's attention than they had been obliged to before.

At the same time that he was setting his private affairs in order, Henry devised a number of public displays to project the magnificence of his dynasty. Until now, he had paid little heed to his younger son Henry's upbringing, focusing his attention on that of his heir,

Prince Arthur. But in September 1494, he organised a lavish ceremony to create the three-year-old prince a Knight of the Bath. The following month, he bestowed the title Duke of York upon him. The choice of title was significant because it signalled that the previous holder, Edward IV's younger son Richard, was dead, and that Warbeck was nothing more than a fraud.

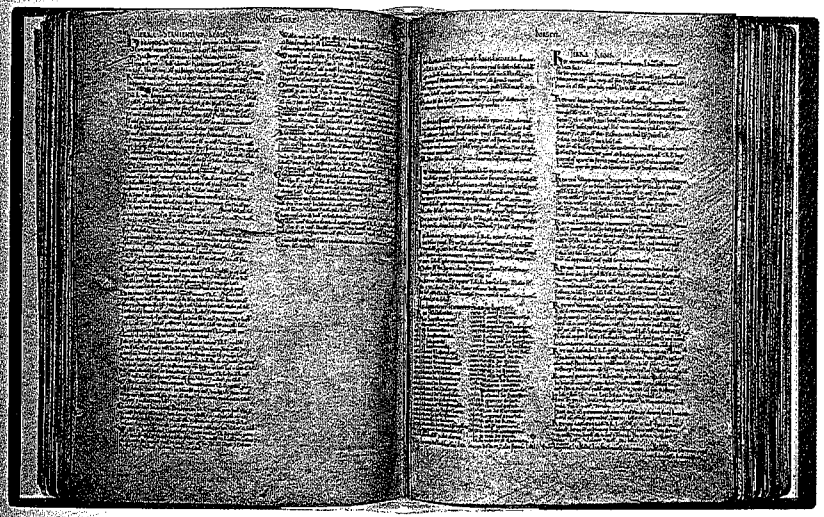
This public expression of Tudor legitimacy was followed by a series of arrests of leading suspects in the Warbeck conspiracy, culminating in the trial and execution of Sir William Stanley in February 1495. The king was no longer inclined to mercy, even for one who had won him the throne. On 3 July, a contingent of Warbeck's forces landed at Deal in Kent, but were swiftly killed or captured. Meanwhile, the pretender was obliged to leave Ireland after failing to defeat the royal authorities there. He found a more willing accomplice in the form of James IV and spent the next two years as an honoured guest at the Scottish court.

Previous English kings had rushed headlong into war on their northern neighbour for far less provocation. But Henry's style of monarchy once again proved both more cautious and diplomatic. Wars involved uncertain outcomes, as well as considerable expense. The latter could only be met by taxation, if Parliament proved willing to grant it, and Henry was anxious not to antagonise his new subjects, painfully aware of how tenuous his hold on the throne was. In order to deprive the pretender of his Scottish ally, he therefore proposed his daughter Margaret as a bride for James. Unfortunately, the King of Scots was not of the same mind. He rejected the offer and proceeded to launch an invasion. This was soon repelled by Henry's forces, and he was obliged to ask Parliament for a hefty subsidy to fund a counter-attack. The tax was granted and Henry's forces triumphed, but as he had feared the heavy burden that this imposed upon his subjects sparked rebellion.

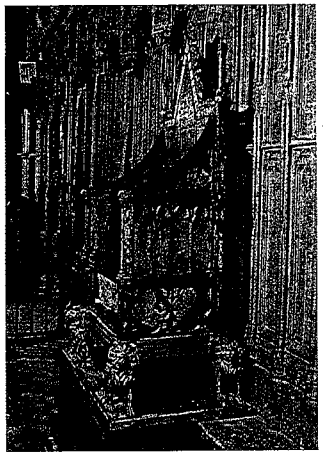
In May 1497, a 15,000-strong army of Cornish rebels marched towards London, gathering support along the way, and encountered the royal forces at Blackheath. The rebels were swiftly put down, but resentment rumbled on in the south-west and Warbeck was invited to lead them. The pretender gladly accepted. In September, he landed in Cornwall and was declared 'Richard IV' on Bodmin

The ancient Coronation Stone in Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey. The stone is believed to have been used for the crowning of seven Anglo-Saxon kings, the first being Edward the Elder in 900.

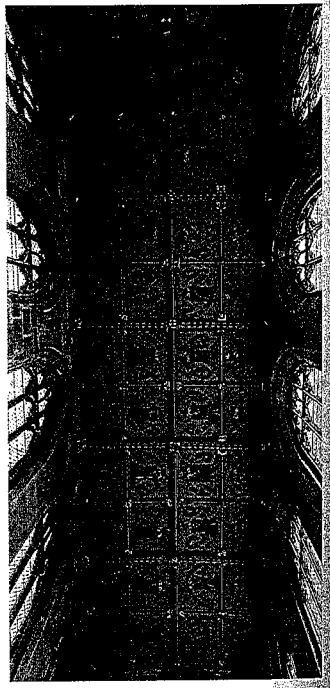
Egbert, King of Wessex from 802 to 839, is often cited as being England's first king. The current queen, Elizabeth II, can trace her descent from him.



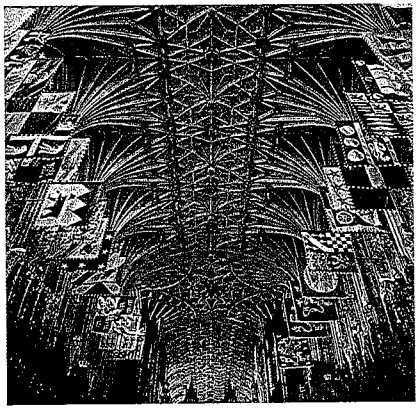
One of the most famous documents in English history, Domesday Book was a vast survey commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1085 to find out the value of his newly conquered lands.



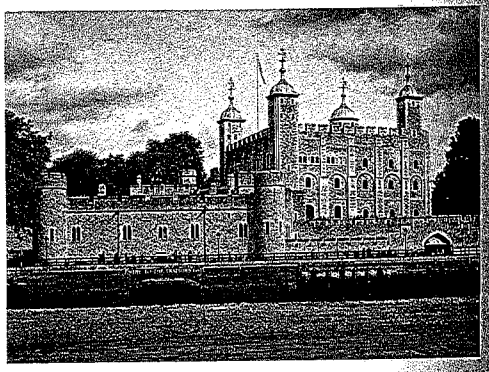
The Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey has been the centrepiece of coronations for more than 700 years.



The ceiling of St Mary's Church in Beverley, East Yorkshire, is decorated with the portraits of forty kings of England.



St George's Chapel, Windsor, home of the Order of the Garter, is where almost every monarch since George III is buried.



First built by William the Conqueror, the Tower of London has remained a potent symbol of royal authority ever since.

Moor. He then marched to Exeter with a band of around eight thousand followers, but they were far outnumbered by Henry's troops and quickly disbanded. Warbeck himself fled to sanctuary, but agreed to meet Henry at Taunton, where the king promised to spare his life. Henry was true to his word – initially, at least. After forcing Warbeck to publicly admit that he was an imposter, he even welcomed him to court.

Having vanquished his most potent enemy, Henry proceeded to undertake some very public displays of kingship. Formal crown-wearings became a regular feature of court life, as did ceremonies to touch for the 'King's Evil'. Another practice that had begun with Edward the Confessor and was revived by Henry VII involved the giving of 'cramp-rings'. These rings were believed to cure a number of ills, including rheumatism and epilepsy, and were given out by the monarch on certain feast days. Their healing properties came from the fact that they had been touched by the sovereign.

Meanwhile, the use of Henry's dynastic badges on buildings, charters and the liveries of his servants became widespread, proclaiming his inherited right to rule. The king also attempted to have Henry VI canonised in order to sanctify his Lancastrian heritage. Henry created symbols of his fledgling dynasty in bricks and mortar, too. Following the destruction by fire of Sheen Palace at Christmas 1497, he ordered the building of a new royal residence at nearby Richmond. When completed, it was a fairy-tale palace with clusters of domed towers and turrets behind a high curtain wall. It soon became Henry's favourite residence.

'He well knew how to maintain his royal dignity', Vergil concluded, 'and everything belonging to his kingship, at all times and places.'[8] But there was something forced about Henry's displays of majesty. Having spent most of his life as an exile from the royal court, he was unfamiliar with the apparatus of monarchy and no amount of money could disguise the fact. He also lacked the charisma of his former rival, Edward IV, and his natural reserve often made him appear awkward at court gatherings. A Spanish envoy named Pedro de Ayala who visited the English court observed: 'He [the king] likes to be much spoken of, and to be highly appreciated by the whole

world. He fails in this because he is not a great man. He spends the time he is not in public or in his council, in writing the accounts of his expenses with his own hand . . . He is much influenced by his mother.' De Ayala concluded that the king was 'disliked' by most of his subjects.[9]

Two Italian visitors to Henry's court in October 1497 noted his spare physique and prominent cheekbones, as well as the greying hair around his temples. One of them reported that the king was 'suspicious of everything . . . he has no one he can trust, except his paid men at arms'.[10] His paranoia was justified. News of Yorkist conspiracies seemed to arrive on a daily basis. In August 1499, the king received word that Perkin Warbeck, who had been imprisoned in the Tower since fleeing the court in June 1498, was conspiring with his fellow prisoner, Warwick. They had a body of supporters who planned to free both men and place one of them on the throne. Henry could no longer afford to be merciful. Warwick and Warbeck were convicted and executed in November 1499.

'England has never before been so tranquil and obedient as at present', reported the Spanish ambassador in January 1500.[11] But Henry was not allowed to enjoy his newfound security for long. In August 1501, Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, nephew of Edward IV, left the country in search of allies on the Continent and assumed the Yorkist title of 'White Rose'. He soon drew a number of powerful Yorkist sympathisers to his cause, including Lord William Courtenay and Sir James Tyrell, one of Richard III's most trusted servants. Thanks to the sophisticated network of spies and informants that he had built up during his reign, the English king swiftly rounded up most of the conspirators, although Suffolk himself evaded capture.

Thomas More later claimed that during Tyrell's interrogation, he confessed to the murders of Edward V and his brother Richard. Although this does not appear in any of the contemporary accounts of his confession, it is intriguing that Queen Elizabeth chose to visit the Tower while he was being held prisoner there. Commenting on Tyrell's execution in May 1502, Vergil observed: 'He paid by his own death the appropriate penalty for his previous crimes.' More explicitly, the king later 'gave out' that while in the Tower, Tyrell was

'examined and confessed' to murdering the princes. If this was by proclamation, then it has not survived, which adds to the mystery that still surrounds the fate of the two young boys.[12]

Not long after bringing the Suffolk conspiracy to light, Henry was able to turn his mind to more positive matters. On 14 November 1501, his son Arthur, then fifteen, married Catherine of Aragon at St Paul's Cathedral. It was the most spectacular royal wedding there had ever been. Thousands of people lined the streets, craning to catch a glimpse of the Spanish princess, who was decked out in 'costly apparel both of goldsmith's work and embroidery, [with] rich jewels'.[13] The bride was led into the church by her soon-to-be brother-in-law, the ten-year-old Prince Henry. The younger Tudor prince stole the show with his gallantry and charisma, outdancing most of the other guests at the celebrations that followed. His energetic presence formed a stark contrast to the groom, who appeared gaunt and ill. Catherine's physician observed that he had 'never seen a man whose legs and other bits of his body were so thin' and later claimed that the prince was too weak to consummate the marriage – something that Catherine herself corroborated.[14]

A seemingly endless round of entertainments followed at the king's new palace of Richmond. The guests were also treated to a host of allegorical pageants celebrating the union of the English and Spanish crowns, and the might of the Tudor dynasty. One of these even went so far as to identify King Henry with God the Father and Arthur with Christ his Son. When the celebrations had finally drawn to a close, Arthur and his bride took up residence at Ludlow. Early the following year, Henry sealed another dynastic marriage when the King of Scots finally consented to take Princess Margaret as his bride as part of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace.

But the greatest catastrophe of Henry VII's reign was just around the corner. On 2 April 1502, Prince Arthur died. Although his death has been ascribed to the sweating sickness, one of the most virulent diseases of the age, there is little evidence for this. More likely is that the prince had been suffering from a lingering illness, as suggested by his gaunt appearance when he married Catherine.

In their grief, the king and queen clung to each other, weeping.

Elizabeth comforted her husband with the assurance that they were still young, and that she might give him another child. But Arthur's death had dealt Henry's dynasty a severe blow and left the Anglo-Spanish alliance in tatters. Hope flared when the queen fell pregnant a month or so later. But this, too, ended in tragedy. The child – a girl – was born on 2 February 1503 and lived for only a few days. The queen followed her to the grave nine days after the birth, on her thirty-seventh birthday.

In his grief, Henry retreated into his privy apartments at Richmond for so many weeks that his councillors began to fear that there would be an uprising. To their consternation, they soon learned that he had fallen prey to what may have been the onset of tuberculosis. If news of the king's sickness had leaked out to the wider court and country, it could have spelt disaster for the dynasty. Coming so soon after the deaths of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Arthur, this latest crisis might also be taken as a sign that God had entirely forsaken the Tudor monarchy.

Henry survived the illness, but when he finally re-emerged into public life, the toll it had taken upon him was all too obvious. Looking much older than his forty-six years, his hair had turned white and his face was heavily lined. Grief had robbed the king of his more laudable virtues and left behind only bitterness, introversion and an all-consuming paranoia. 'He was a prince, sad, serious, full of thoughts, and secret observations: and full of notes and memorials of his own hand . . . keeping (as it were) a journal of his thoughts', observed Bacon.[15]

Despite his obvious frailty, the king soon turned his mind to business. One of the most pressing issues was how to salvage his alliance with Spain. His daughter-in-law Catherine was still in England and Henry was determined to keep her there. Ferdinand was also keen and had proposed that she marry the king's younger son, Henry. But the English king had other ideas. To the great consternation of both courts, he suggested that he marry Catherine himself. Queen Isabella wrote at once to upbraid him for proposing 'a very evil thing . . . which offends the ears'.[16] It may have been gamesmanship on Henry's part, aimed at making the Spanish monarchs even more determined that their daughter should marry

his younger son. Not long afterwards, negotiations to secure a papal dispensation for Catherine and Prince Henry's marriage began.

At the same time, the king sealed a prestigious marriage agreement with the Duke of Burgundy, in which he pledged his younger daughter Mary to the duke's son, Charles of Ghent, grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella. Upon the death of his father, Charles stood to inherit a sprawling empire that included Castile and Aragon, the Netherlands and, potentially, the position of Holy Roman Emperor.[17] By placing diplomacy rather than war at the heart of his foreign policy, Henry VII arguably achieved more for England's security and prosperity than any of his Plantagenet predecessors. Having won the throne by conquest, the king was not averse to waging war when it was expedient, but he did not fall prey to the same vanity that had inspired centuries of English kings to pursue personal glory at the expense of their country's resources. His approach marked the beginning of a more peaceable, modern monarchy.

In these later years of his reign, Henry became ever more obsessed with filling the royal treasury and overhauling the administration of the crown's finances. The deaths of some of his long-standing officials left the way open for new men of the same mind as the king to take control. Two of the most despised were Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley. Both were astute lawyers, but Vergil claimed that they had been promoted by the king 'not so much to administer justice as to strip the population of its wealth, without respite and by every means fair or foul'.[18] With their assistance, the king introduced new and increasingly burdensome taxes upon the clergy, the merchant class and the population at large. He also ruthlessly exploited his feudal rights over those who held land directly from the crown and imposed heavy fines upon those who were found to be evading their liabilities. Royal commissioners toured the shires more frequently than ever before in order to identify new sources of income. All of this was in line with the law, but the king also embraced more corrupt practices, such as selling offices or even his favour in lawsuits.

By the end of his reign, Henry had transformed the royal finances and amassed greater wealth than had been enjoyed by any king for

generations. Arguably, this was vital to strengthening the new Tudor monarchy – many times, history had proved that impoverishment made the crown dangerously vulnerable. But there was a fine dividing line between prosperity and greed. The Venetian ambassador referred to Henry VII as 'a very great miser', but was grudgingly impressed that he had 'accumulated so much gold that he is supposed to have more than well nigh all the other Kings of Christendom'.[19] Vergil observed that Henry's subjects 'considered they were suffering not on account of their own sins but on account of the greed of their monarch'.[20] The king's growing rapaciousness had done more to challenge their loyalty than any of the pretenders to his throne.

Henry's parsimonious and increasingly distrustful nature made him less inclined to enrich or empower those who served him than many of his predecessors had been. Rather than bestowing key positions on favourites, regardless of whether they were capable of fulfilling them effectively, he appointed lawyers, clerics and household men to manage the work of government. He also expanded the jurisdiction of the courts, which severely limited the nobility's freedom of action. All of this made him a far more effective king than many who had gone before, albeit one who was more feared than loved.

Henry's thoughts also turned to his legacy. Shortly after his wife's death, work had begun on a spectacular new chapel at Westminster Abbey. With its breathtaking fan-vaulted ceiling and sumptuous carvings and decorations, the Lady Chapel was rightly described by the sixteenth-century historian John Leland as 'the wonder of the world'. Its bronze gates displayed a host of Tudor royal emblems: the Beaufort portcullis, the lions of England, the fleurs-de-lis of France, and the crown and thornbush, which may symbolise Henry's triumph over Richard III at Bosworth. The chapel would become the burial place of fifteen kings and queens (Henry VII and his wife Elizabeth included) and remains one of the most awe-inspiring expressions of monarchy ever created.

The king's health had never fully recovered from the prolonged bout of sickness he had suffered in 1503. Four years later, when he was in his fiftieth year, he was so incapacitated that his ministers began to

speculate on the succession. By the beginning of 1509, it was obvious that Henry would not live much longer. In February, he moved to Richmond. There, he lingered on for almost two months, but died 'in an agony of pain and penitence' at around 11 p.m. on 21 April, surrounded by his most trusted attendants.[21]

Anxious to ensure a smooth succession, his close officials and servants kept his death secret for two full days while they made arrangements. Even the king's son and heir, Henry, was apparently kept in ignorance. But rumours of the king's demise were already circulating in the city the following day. Fearing unrest, those who were privy to the secret began to quietly stock the royal armoury. They need not have worried. Henry VIII would be the first monarch since 1421 to accede to the throne peacefully as a crowned king, rather than by usurpation or conquest.

Most of the late king's requests for his commemoration were carried out, notably the magnificent tomb at Westminster by Pietro Torrigiano, with its extraordinary lifelike effigies of Henry and his queen. But Henry had also left provision for a gold-plated statue of himself, kneeling in full armour, holding the crown as he had received it at Bosworth: at the hands of God. This was to be placed atop the shrine of Edward the Confessor, the most hallowed of all English monarchs. For the new king, though, this was evidently a bequest too far. The statue would remain a figment of his late father's imagination.