



# The Tudors

## 10 The birth of the nation state

*The new monarchy • The Reformation • The Protestant–Catholic struggle*

The century of Tudor rule (1485–1603) is often thought of as a most glorious period in English history. Henry VII built the foundations of a wealthy nation state and a powerful monarchy. His son, Henry VIII, kept a magnificent court, and made the Church in England truly English by breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, his daughter Elizabeth brought glory to the new state by defeating the powerful navy of Spain, the greatest European power of the time. During the Tudor age England experienced one of the greatest artistic periods in its history.

There is, however, a less glorious view of the Tudor century. Henry VIII wasted the wealth saved by his father. Elizabeth weakened the quality of government by selling official posts. She did this to avoid asking Parliament for money. And although her government tried to deal with the problem of poor and homeless people at a time when prices rose much faster than wages, its laws and actions were often cruel in effect.

### The new monarchy

Henry VII is less well known than either Henry VIII or Elizabeth I. But he was far more important in establishing the new monarchy than either of

*Left: The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 was the most glorious event of Elizabeth I's reign. It marked the arrival of England as a great European sea power, leading the way to the development of the empire over the next two centuries. It also marked the limit of Spain's ability to recapture Protestant countries for the Catholic Church.*

*Right: Henry VII was clever with people and careful with money. He holds a red Lancastrian rose in his hand, but he brought unity to the Houses of York and Lancaster. His successors symbolised this unity by use of a red rose with white outer petals, the "Tudor" rose.*

them. He had the same ideas and opinions as the growing classes of merchants and gentleman farmers, and he based royal power on good business sense.

Henry VII firmly believed that war and glory were bad for business, and that business was good for the state. He therefore avoided quarrels either with Scotland in the north, or France in the south.



During the fifteenth century, but particularly during the Wars of the Roses, England's trading position had been badly damaged. The strong German Hanseatic League, a closed trading society, had destroyed English trade with the Baltic and northern Europe. Trade with Italy and France had also been reduced after England's defeat in France in the mid-fifteenth century. The Low Countries (the Netherlands and Belgium) alone offered a way in for trade in Europe. Only a year after his victory at Bosworth in 1485, Henry VII made an important trade agreement with the Netherlands which allowed English trade to grow again.

Henry was fortunate. Many of the old nobility had died or been defeated in the recent wars, and their



Henry VIII, by the great court painter Hans Holbein. Henry was hard, cruel, ambitious and calculating. Few survived his anger. He executed two of his wives, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, and several of his ministers and leading churchmen. Best known among these were his Lord Chancellor, Thomas More, and his assistant in carrying out the Reformation, Thomas Cromwell.

lands had gone to the king. This meant that Henry had more power and more money than earlier kings. In order to establish his authority beyond question, he forbade anyone, except himself, to keep armed men.

The authority of the law had been almost completely destroyed by the lawless behaviour of nobles and their armed men. Henry used the "Court of Star Chamber", traditionally the king's council chamber, to deal with lawless nobles. Local justice that had broken down during the wars slowly began to operate again. Henry encouraged the use of heavy fines as punishment because this gave the Crown money.

Henry's aim was to make the Crown financially independent, and the lands and the fines he took from the old nobility helped him do this. Henry also raised taxes for wars which he then did not fight. He never spent money unless he had to. One might expect Henry to have been unpopular, but he was careful to keep the friendship of the merchant and lesser gentry classes. Like him they wanted peace and prosperity. He created a new nobility from among them, and men unknown before now became Henry's statesmen. But they all knew that their rise to importance was completely dependent on the Crown.

When Henry died in 1509 he left behind the huge total of £2 million, about fifteen years' worth of income. The only thing on which he was happy to spend money freely was the building of ships for a merchant fleet. Henry understood earlier than most people that England's future wealth would depend on international trade. And in order to trade, Henry realised that England must have its own fleet of merchant ships.

Henry VIII was quite unlike his father. He was cruel, wasteful with money, and interested in pleasing himself. He wanted to become an important influence in European politics. But much had happened in Europe since England had given up its efforts to defeat France in the Hundred Years War. France was now more powerful than England, and Spain was even more powerful, because it was united with the Holy Roman Empire (which

included much of central Europe). Henry VIII wanted England to hold the balance of power between these two giants. He first unsuccessfully allied himself with Spain, and when he was not rewarded he changed sides. When friendship with France did not bring him anything, Henry started talking again to Charles V of Spain.

Henry's failure to gain an important position in European politics was a bitter disappointment. He spent so much on maintaining a magnificent court, and on wars from which England had little to gain, that his father's carefully saved money was soon gone. Gold and silver from newly discovered America added to economic inflation. In this serious financial crisis, Henry needed money. One way of doing this was by reducing the amount of silver used in coins. But although this gave Henry immediate profits, it rapidly led to a rise in prices. It was therefore a damaging policy, and the English coinage was reduced to a seventh of its value within twenty-five years.

## The Reformation

Henry VIII was always looking for new sources of money. His father had become powerful by taking over the nobles' land, but the lands owned by the Church and the monasteries had not been touched. The Church was a huge landowner, and the monasteries were no longer important to economic and social growth in the way they had been two hundred years earlier. In fact they were unpopular because many monks no longer led a good religious life but lived in wealth and comfort.

Henry disliked the power of the Church in England because, since it was an international organisation, he could not completely control it. If Henry had been powerful enough in Europe to influence the pope it might have been different. But there were two far more powerful states, France, and Spain, with the Holy Roman Empire, lying between him and Rome. The power of the Catholic Church in England could therefore work against his own authority, and the taxes paid to the Church

reduced his own income. Henry was not the only European king with a wish to "centralise" state authority. Many others were doing the same thing. But Henry had another reason for standing up to the authority of the Church.

In 1510 Henry had married Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his elder brother Arthur. But by 1526 she had still not had a son who survived infancy and was now unlikely to do so. Henry tried to persuade the pope to allow him to divorce Catherine. Normally, Henry need not have expected any difficulty. His chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, had already been skilful in advising on Henry's foreign and home policy. Wolsey hoped that his skills, and his important position in the Church, would be successful in persuading the pope. But the pope was controlled by Charles V, who was Holy Roman Emperor and king of Spain, and also Catherine's nephew. For both political and family reasons he wanted Henry to stay married to Catherine. The pope did not wish to anger either Charles or Henry, but eventually he was forced to do as Charles V wanted. He forbade Henry's divorce.

Henry was extremely angry and the first person to feel his anger was his own minister, Cardinal Wolsey. Wolsey only escaped execution by dying of natural causes on his way to the king's court, and after Wolsey no priest ever again became an important minister of the king. In 1531 Henry persuaded the bishops to make him head of the Church in England, and this became law after Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534. It was a popular decision. Henry was now free to divorce Catherine and marry his new love, Anne Boleyn. He hoped Anne would give him a son to follow him on the throne.

Henry's break with Rome was purely political. He had simply wanted to control the Church and to keep its wealth in his own kingdom. He did not approve of the new ideas of Reformation Protestantism introduced by Martin Luther in Germany and John Calvin in Geneva. He still believed in the Catholic faith. Indeed, Henry had earlier written a book criticising Luther's teaching

and the pope had rewarded him with the title *Fidei Defensor*, Defender of the Faith. The pope must have regretted his action. The letters "F.D." are still to be found on every British coin.

Like his father, Henry VIII governed England through his close advisers, men who were completely dependent on him for their position. But when he broke with Rome, he used Parliament to make the break legal. Through several Acts of Parliament between 1532 and 1536, England became politically a Protestant country, even though the popular religion was still Catholic.

Once England had accepted the separation from Rome Henry took the English Reformation a step further. Wolsey's place as the king's chief minister was taken by one of his assistants, Thomas Cromwell. Henry and Cromwell made a careful survey of Church property, the first properly organised tax survey since the Domesday Book 450 years earlier. Between 1536 and 1539 they closed 560 monasteries and other religious houses. Henry did this in order to make money, but he also wanted to be popular with the rising classes of landowners and merchants. He therefore gave or sold much of the monasteries' lands to them. Many smaller landowners made their fortunes. Most knocked down the old monastery buildings and

used the stone to create magnificent new houses for themselves. Other buildings were just left to fall down.

Meanwhile the monks and nuns were thrown out. Some were given small sums of money, but many were unable to find work and became wandering beggars. The dissolution of the monasteries was probably the greatest act of official destruction in the history of Britain.

Henry proved that his break with Rome was neither a religious nor a diplomatic disaster. He remained loyal to Catholic religious teaching, and executed Protestants who refused to accept it. He even made an alliance with Charles V of Spain against France. For political reasons both of them were willing to forget the quarrel over Catherine of Aragon, and also England's break with Rome.

Henry died in 1547, leaving behind his sixth wife, Catherine Parr, and his three children. Mary, the eldest, was the daughter of Catherine of Aragon. Elizabeth was the daughter of his second wife, Anne Boleyn, whom he had executed because she was unfaithful. Nine-year-old Edward was the son of Jane Seymour, the only wife whom Henry had really loved, but who had died giving birth to his only son.



The ruins of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, one of the greatest and wealthiest English monasteries. It finally surrendered to Henry's reformation in 1539. The stained glass and lead window frames and roofing were removed immediately. But it was not until 1611 that some of the stone was taken to build Fountains Hall, nearby. Even so, the abbey was so huge that most of the stone was never taken and the abbey survived as a ruin.

## The Protestant–Catholic struggle

Edward VI, Henry VIII's son, was only a child when he became king, so the country was ruled by a council. All the members of this council were from the new nobility created by the Tudors. They were keen Protestant reformers because they had benefited from the sale of monastery lands. Indeed, all the new landowners knew that they could only be sure of keeping their new lands if they made England truly Protestant.

Most English people still believed in the old Catholic religion. Less than half the English were Protestant by belief, but these people were allowed to take a lead in religious matters. In 1552 a new prayer book was introduced to make sure that all churches followed the new Protestant religion. Most people were not very happy with the new religion. They had been glad to see the end of some of the Church's bad practices like the selling of "pardons" for the forgiveness of sins. But they did not like the changes in belief, and in some places there was trouble.

Mary, the Catholic daughter of Catherine of Aragon, became queen when Edward, aged sixteen, died in 1553. A group of nobles tried to put Lady

Jane Grey, a Protestant, on the throne. But Mary succeeded in entering London and took control of the kingdom. She was supported by the ordinary people, who were angered by the greed of the Protestant nobles.

However, Mary was unwise and unbending in her policy and her beliefs. She was the first queen of England since Matilda, 400 years earlier. At that time women were considered to be inferior to men. The marriage of a queen was therefore a difficult matter. If Mary married an Englishman she would be under the control of a man of lesser importance. If she married a foreigner it might place England under foreign control.

Mary, for political, religious and family reasons, chose to marry King Philip of Spain. It was an unfortunate choice. The ordinary people disliked the marriage, as Philip's Spanish friends in England were quick to notice. Popular feeling was so strong that a rebellion in Kent actually reached London before ending in failure. Mary dealt cruelly with the rebel leader, Wyatt, but she took the unusual step of asking Parliament for its opinion about her marriage plan. Parliament unwillingly agreed to Mary's marriage, and it only accepted Philip as king of England for Mary's lifetime.

*A Protestant propaganda picture of Edward VI being told by his dying father, Henry VIII, to uphold the true Protestant religion. At Edward's feet the pope collapses defeated. Under Edward England became far more Protestant than before, and more Protestant, probably, than his father intended. The young king was assisted by men who had profited from Church lands and property after the break with Rome.*



Mary's marriage to Philip was the first mistake of her unfortunate reign. She then began burning Protestants. Three hundred people died in this way during her five-year reign, and the burnings began to sicken people. At the same time, the thought of becoming a junior ally of Spain was very unpopular. Only the knowledge that Mary herself was dying prevented a popular rebellion.

Elizabeth, Mary's half sister, was lucky to become queen when Mary died in 1558. Mary had considered killing her, because she was an obvious leader for Protestant revolt. Elizabeth had been wise enough to say nothing, do nothing, and to express neither Catholic nor Protestant views while Mary lived. And Philip persuaded Mary to leave Elizabeth unharmed.

When she became queen in 1558, Elizabeth I wanted to find a peaceful answer to the problems of the English Reformation. She wanted to bring together again those parts of English society which were in religious disagreement. And she wanted to make England prosperous. In some ways the kind of Protestantism finally agreed in 1559 remained closer to the Catholic religion than to other Protestant groups. But Elizabeth made sure that the Church was still under her authority, unlike politically dangerous forms of Protestantism in Europe. In a way, she made the Church part of the state machine.

The "parish", the area served by one church, usually the same size as a village, became the unit of state administration. People had to go to church on Sundays by law and they were fined if they stayed away. This meant that the parish priest, the "parson" or "vicar", became almost as powerful as the village squire. Elizabeth also arranged for a book of sermons to be used in church. Although most of the sermons consisted of Bible teaching, this book also taught the people that rebellion against the Crown was a sin against God.

The struggle between Catholics and Protestants continued to endanger Elizabeth's position for the next thirty years. Both France and Spain were Catholic. Elizabeth and her advisers wanted to avoid open quarrels with both of them. This was

not easy, because both the French and Spanish kings wanted to marry Elizabeth and so join England to their own country. Elizabeth and her advisers knew how much damage Mary had done and that it was important that she should avoid such a marriage. At the same time, however, there was a danger that the pope would persuade Catholic countries to attack England. Finally, there was a danger from those Catholic nobles still in England who wished to remove Elizabeth and replace her with the queen of Scotland, who was a Catholic.

Mary, the Scottish queen, usually called "Queen of Scots", was the heir to the English throne because she was Elizabeth's closest living relative, and because Elizabeth had not married. Mary's mother had been French, and Mary had spent her childhood in France, and was a strong Catholic. When she returned to rule Scotland as queen, Mary soon made enemies of some of her nobles, and to avoid them she finally escaped to the safety of England. Elizabeth, however, kept Mary as a prisoner for almost twenty years. During that time Elizabeth discovered several secret Catholic plots, some of which clearly aimed at making Mary queen of England.

It was difficult for Elizabeth to decide what to do with Mary. She knew that France was unlikely to attack England in support of Mary. But she was afraid that Spain might do so. Mary's close connection with France, however, was a discouragement to Philip. He would not wish to defeat Elizabeth only to put Mary on the throne. It would be giving England to the French. So for a long time Elizabeth just kept Mary as a prisoner.

When Elizabeth finally agreed to Mary's execution in 1587, it was partly because Mary had named Philip as her heir to the throne of England, and because with this claim Philip of Spain had decided to invade England. Elizabeth no longer had a reason to keep Mary alive. In England Mary's execution was popular. The Catholic plots and the dangers of a foreign Catholic invasion had changed people's feelings. By 1585 most English people believed that to be a Catholic was to be an enemy of England. This hatred of everything Catholic became an important political force.