

# Henry VI and the challenges to the crown 1453–61

If the primary, long-term cause of the Wars of the Roses was the dangerous precedent set by Henry IV's usurpation of the throne in 1399, the more immediate or short-term cause centres on Henry VI. The character and personality of Henry VI have been contrasted with the charismatic and strong leadership of Richard, Duke of York. Henry VI's failure to manage the royal debt and prosecute the war in France led to challenges to his throne and eventually to his death during the civil conflict that he had helped to create. The fall of the House of Lancaster was mirrored by the rise of the House of York. These events are examined as three themes:

- ◆ Origins of the Wars of the Roses
- ◆ The rise of Richard, Duke of York
- ◆ The fall of the House of Lancaster

## KEY DATES

1453	Henry VI descended into insanity War in France was lost	1459	'Parliament of Devils'
1455	The Wars of the Roses began	1460	Death of Richard, Duke of York
1458	The 'Loveday'	1461	Edward IV usurped the throne by removing Henry VI

## 1 Origins of the Wars of the Roses

■ *How has historical opinion of the Wars of the Roses changed?*

### Defining the Wars of the Roses

The Wars of the Roses were a dynastic struggle between the noble families (and their supporters) of Lancaster and York. Both sides believed that the crown of England rightfully belonged to them. The result of this rivalry was war; between 1455 and 1487 Lancastrians and Yorkists fought a series of pitched battles to secure control of the crown. In seeking to explain why major historical events such as the Wars of the Roses happen, historians tend to classify and categorise their conclusions into long- and short-term causes. One key area of debate concerning the origins of the Wars of the Roses is how far back historians should look for explanations. The majority of historians believe that the root cause of the later dynastic struggle between Lancaster and York can be found in the reign of Richard II (1377–99). For more immediate or short-term causes of the Wars of the Roses, historians focus on the period from the early to mid-1440s or, more

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specifically, when Henry VI came of age and became responsible for the war in France and the government of his kingdom.

## The long-term causes of the Wars of the Roses

The origins of the dynastic struggle between Lancaster and York can be traced back to the deposition of the Plantagenet king Richard II (see family tree, Figure 2.5, page 17):

- The Plantagenets had ruled England more or less unchallenged for around 200 years until 1399, when some members of the aristocracy became unhappy with the arbitrary and authoritarian rule of Richard II.
- By promoting some noble favourites at the expense of others, some of whom were stripped of their titles and exiled, Richard contributed to a growing sense of discontent and resentment.
- Chief among the exiled nobility was Richard's cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, who had a distant claim to the throne. Denied his inheritance, the Dukedom of Lancaster, Bolingbroke returned from exile and gathered enough support to win the crown for himself.
- Richard was **deposed** and imprisoned in Pontefract Castle, where he later died. The usurpation set a dangerous precedent which would be copied nearly a century later in 1483 by Richard, Duke of York.

### KEY TERM

**Depose** To rid the kingdom of its reigning monarch by forcing him to abdicate or resign.

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## The short-term causes of the Wars of the Roses

In view of Henry VI's weak will and indecision, the majority of historians agree that, to find the most significant short-term cause of the Wars of the Roses, it is unnecessary to look back further than the personal rule of Henry VI:

- Historian B.P. Wolffe (writing in 1983) believes that Henry's incompetence alone explains the dynastic conflict that led to his usurpation. By promoting the rise of a few noble favourites, Henry VI alienated some of the most powerful nobles in England. Foremost among them was his cousin, Richard, Duke of York, a man who could also claim descent from Edward III.
- However, some historians, such as John Watts (writing in 1999) and Alison Weir (writing in 1995), believe that Richard, rather than Henry VI, should be blamed for the conflict. Others disagree, most notably A.J. Pollard (writing in 1995), who countered by stating that York had been driven to rebel by the king's mismanagement of him.
- Equally serious in the minds of the politically powerful was the king's failure to prosecute the war in France. As the military losses mounted, so the Crown's popularity declined. Henry's failure to curb lawlessness and disorder, curb corruption and misgovernment, and reduce the burden of taxation added to the monarchy's woes.
- The result was the popular uprising known as Cade's rebellion (1450), which some historians see as the opening salvo in what was becoming a more volatile and violent period in England's history.

- The Crown's failure to prevent the keeping of armed retainers maintained by the nobility helped to exacerbate the political instability because these private armies were used to defy the law and perpetuate the conflict.
- Apart from those few who opted to remain neutral (if they could), the majority of the nobility were faced with the dilemma of who to support should the political struggle turn to military confrontation. Taking sides was no easy choice for the nobility because they had so much to lose. The simmering resentment of the 1440s boiled over into armed conflict in the 1450s and the scene was set for civil war.