

The Tudors

To many people, Henry remains the most important monarchs to have ruled the English and Welsh. He lasted almost forty years, during which he laid the foundation of the Church of England, he remodelled government and changed the method of taxation. He grew the importance of Parliament, he incorporated Wales into the regular system of English local administration, and he established the Kingdom of Ireland and a major building programme which included colleges, palaces, and fortresses. He is also remembered as a colossal figure.

Henry was one of the lads, the only English king to have his achievements celebrated in a long-popular music hall song, "I'm Henry the VIII, I am". This is just how he would have wanted things.

Henry was the second son of Henry VII and throughout his childhood was overshadowed by his older brother Arthur. He stayed with his mother, Elizabeth of York, keeping a sheltered existence, while Arthur was paraded before the kingdom as its heir. Both Arthur and Elizabeth died, leaving the old king grief stricken and Henry lacked any affection. Father and son never really got on. Henry showed this clearly when he succeeded to the throne and straight away turned over most of his father's policies and executed some of his most trusted servants.

He also brought to the job a massive amount of energy, with a huge appetite for food and drink. It is said that in his youth, he wore out eight horses a day while hunting, and also engaged regularly in dancing, jousting, and wrestling. Things started to go wrong for him when he was forty-four, his horse fell on him in a tournament, crushing one leg and leaving him an invalid. The accident stopped him taking any exercise, while his overeating didn't slow down, so much so that in the end he measured four and half feet round his waist.

Henry's appetite for pleasure was also matched by his passion for business. He was the last monarch for over a century to attend the debates of the House of Lords, and in his last seven years he personally gave 108 interviews to foreign ambassadors. He wanted all of the state documents to be drawn up with large margins and spaces between lines so that he could scribble comments. Henry possessed an extraordinary mind; he was able to remember the names of every servant employed by the royal households and all the grants of land or money which he had ever signed. He was a fanatical annotator, editor, and commentator, loving the detail of government but disliking the main business.

Henry was quite a good musician, and possessed a huge library of nearly a thousand books, which he certainly must have read as he scribbled all over them! He had a real understanding of building defences, weapons and ship building, and could hold discussions with mathematicians and astronomers on equal terms.

Henry's court was a perfect model of decorum compared with most others in Europe, those persons who came to court were forbidden to fight, duel, or go out in public with their mistresses. His vices were gluttony, showing off and gambling: in a two year period he lost over £3,250 on cards and by his death he owned a record 50 palaces, some he had won. It is true, however, that he had a grosser side, - and his favourite jokes concerned the less sociable bodily functions.

As a man, he was genuinely charming, was wildly affectionate, and had a desperate desire to please. He took a real interest in other people. The king's negative qualities were the other faces of his positive side. If he was expressive in his affections, so was he in his rages, he abused courtiers, verbally and physically. His showiness could lead him into scenes which embarrassed all around him, such as the weeks of public crying which followed the exposure that his fifth queen, Catherine Howard, had been unfaithful to him. The impression is that his courtiers often felt that they were dealing with a huge child; and a lethally dangerous one. His reign probably contained more political executions than any other of comparable length in English history - 330 in the years 1532 - 40 alone - and the king took a personal interest in increasing the physical suffering and humiliation of some of those condemned.

Henry never showed any capacity as a general, and his foreign policy was a failure. He repeatedly attempted to reconquer parts of France, and just ended up with Boulogne, a third-rate port that was subsequently handed back to the French after over a million pounds had been spent trying to keep it. He tried to conquer Scotland, and only forced the Scots to become partners of his enemies the French. Two real successes of his reign - the integration of Wales and the pacification of Ireland - were not matters in which he displayed personal interest. He built a splendid string of fortresses to guard the English coast which were a sign of panic, at having united all the strongest powers in Western Europe against himself by rejecting Catholicism. The overhaul of government structures and taxation, carried out by his ministers, was driven by the need to raise money for his wars, where it was spent to little result.

Henry repeatedly declared both that he was determined to rule effectively and that the best way of managing people was through fear; this statement confirms his insecurities. As well as savagely punishing ministers for failure, he constantly encouraged them to spy on each other for signs of incompetence or disloyalty and to inform the king privately of such signs. This led to an atmosphere of suspicion and competition at court, which worsened as the king grew older. Only two of his leading advisers, Archbishop Cranmer and Edward Seymour, escaped either disgrace or execution. In two major respects, however, his mixture of caution and flamboyance paid off. He managed the nobility by honouring and flattering them and, by carefully seeking the endorsement of Parliament for all his reforms; he increased both the power of the Crown and of representative democracy. These two techniques combined to make his rule effective.

His reputation among 20th century historians has generally been low, but in his own time it stood much higher. Europe expected its kings to be a mixture of the lion and the

fox - daring, generous, majestic, ruthless, and scheming - and Henry fitted the image. He was feared, and admired, and his death was marked by more obvious public grief than that of any other Tudor. That the public remembers him as Bluff King Hal rather than as a murderous cripple testifies much to his talent for self-presentation.