



THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The second phase of The Hundred Years' War. Social unrest persisted under the reign of Henry V (1413-1422) and was evidenced by the rising of the Lollards in 1415. The revolt was checked and order restored, but the pressures to resume the war against France increased; the troubled conditions of the country and the insanity of King Charles VI of France invited to aggression. After making an alliance with the Burgundians, Henry V renewed his claim to the throne of France and in 1415 he landed in Normandy. The brilliant victory of Agincourt (1415) enabled Henry V, to secure by the Treaty of Troyes (1420), the recognition of his claim to the throne at the death of Charles VI; but he died prematurely in 1422 and the war was carried on by his brother, the Duke of Bedford.

In 1429 the French were desperately defending Orléans, the last important town not yet in the hands of the English, when the astonishing figure of Joan of Arc (1412-1431) appeared. Joan, a peasant girl from Lorraine, persuaded the French authorities to give her the leadership of the army. Her presence disheartened the English and encouraged the French. The siege of Orléans was quickly raised and henceforth the English began to lose ground, while the French obtained more and more success, which was followed by the crowning of Charles VI's son, Charles VII, as king of France in the Cathedral of Reims. The war went on, but Joan was captured by the Duke of Burgundy and sold to the English; she was tried by an ecclesiastical court and condemned to be burned as a witch in Rouen market-place in 1431, when she was nineteen years old. Twenty-four years later, the Vatican reviewed the decision of the ecclesiastical court, found her innocent, and declared her a martyr. She was beatified in 1909 and canonized as a saint in 1920.

The English in 1453, having lost the support of the Burgundians, suffered a decisive defeat in the Battle of Chatillon; only Calais remained in their possession.

The War of the Roses. The ruinous war against France and the long years of misgovernment caused a general discontent, which found expression in the Revolt of Kent in 1450. The bulk of rebels included peasants and labourers as well as tradesmen and squires, in a more varied composition than those of the previous riots. The rebels' demands, wholly political in character, were set out in the Bill of Complaint, a document calling for administrative and economic reforms. The rebels, in order to end misgovernment, supported the party of the Duke of York, who had a better claim to the throne than the insane King Henry VI (1422-1461).

The army of the insurgents, led by Jack Cade, defeated the royal forces at Sevenoaks, but it was later dispersed in London, and Cade and the majority of his followers were killed. The rising showed the weakness of the Government and, in 1455, a civil war became inevitable. Henry VI, like his maternal grandfather, suffered from recurrent attacks of insanity and the Duke of York, in questioning the legal title of the House of Lancaster, advanced his claim to the throne.

The civil war, which broke out in the country, was called The War of the Roses (1455-1485) after the emblems of the two rival Houses involved in the contest: the red rose for Lancaster and the white rose for York. It was fought mainly by rival gangs of nobles and the majority of the people were little disturbed. The most backward feudal nobility supported the House of Lancaster, while the progressive Southern counties, such as East Anglia and London, supported the House of York. The only great battle of the war was won by the Yorkists in 1461. As the Duke of York had been killed in battle, his son Edward IV (1461-1483) came to the throne.

Edward IV was a capable and energetic king: he encouraged trade and promoted the building of a fleet to ship English wool and cloths abroad, but he could not completely check the anarchy of the nobles and the internal disorder.

At Edward's death in 1483, his brother, Richard of Gloucester (Richard III, 1483-1485), made himself king, usurping the rights of his nephew Edward V. The two sons of Edward IV were imprisoned in the Tower and murdered. In his turn, Richard III was involved in a struggle with the nobles, who had helped him to become king, and when Henry Tudor claimed the throne, Richard found himself without supporters.

The War of the Roses came to a conclusion in 1485 with the Battle of Bosworth Field, in which Henry Tudor defeated Richard III and became king of England. Henry, who descended from the Lancastrian House, united the two rival branches by marrying Elizabeth of York.

The reign of Henry VII. Henry VII (1485-1509), founder of the Tudor dynasty, was a cunning and capable king, well intentioned to restore order and a strong central power. When he began to reign he was confronted with the disorder following the civil war and the persistent opposition of the nobles. But he found a compensative advantage in the alliance with the merchants and the town artisans.

The growth of a new class had altered the old social structure; in those days the middle class had become strong enough to keep in power any government which promised peace and stability. It was mainly their support that enabled Henry to concentrate a broad range of power in his hands and to lay the basis of a steady monarchy.



Henry VII devoted most of his energies to reducing the power of the nobles, passing a law prohibiting them to keep private armies of retainers. Then he strengthened the judicial authority of the royal Council by establishing a special court, called the Court of Star Chamber, to try those offenders who were powerful enough to influence the common courts. Besides weakening the old aristocracy, Henry created a new nobility, drawn from the upper middle class, and set men of humble origin in the State administration.

After checking the opposition, Henry consolidated his power and strengthened the State machinery; he restored the finances of the country and accumulated a big treasure by exploiting every source of revenue and by pursuing the utmost economy. The only field in which he was not cautious in spending money was on building ships as it was closely connected with the development and expansion of the English trade. In foreign policy Henry VII, according to the trends of the time, tried to bring England, which in the medieval period had stood aloof, in line with other powerful countries struggling for supremacy in Europe.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1413-1422 Reign of Henry V: 1415 → Hundred Years' War, second phase (Battle of Agincourt).

1422-1461 Reign of Henry VI: 1450 → Jack Cade's Revolt; 1453 → End of The Hundred Years' War (Battle of Chatillon).

1455-1485 War of the Roses: 1461-1483 → Reign of Edward IV; 1483-1485 → Reign of Richard III.

1485-1509 Reign of Henry VII.

