

Henry VI

Verey Gallery, Eton College
20 November 2021 ~ 8 May 2022





Portrait of Henry VI, 1590 [FDA-P.40-2010]



Introduction

‘Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child’

Ecclesiastes 10:16

Henry VI was King of England from 1422 to 1461, and again from 1470 to 1471, the last king of the Lancastrian dynasty. He is the youngest monarch England has ever had, and has been described as weak-willed, easily led, timid and averse to warfare, character traits not popular in a king in the 15th century. He is chiefly remembered for his apparent failures – the loss of Normandy, his illness, reliance on others and ultimately the devastating civil war which followed. However, he was also gentle, devout and kindly, and left behind a legacy of educational foundations and cultural patronage. On his death, he was treated as a saint and martyr.

To celebrate the 600th anniversary of his birth at Windsor in December 1421, this exhibition seeks to explore Henry’s life and his achievements, with a focus on what has been described as one of the only real achievements of his reign – the foundation of Eton College.

Eleanor Hoare
College Archivist





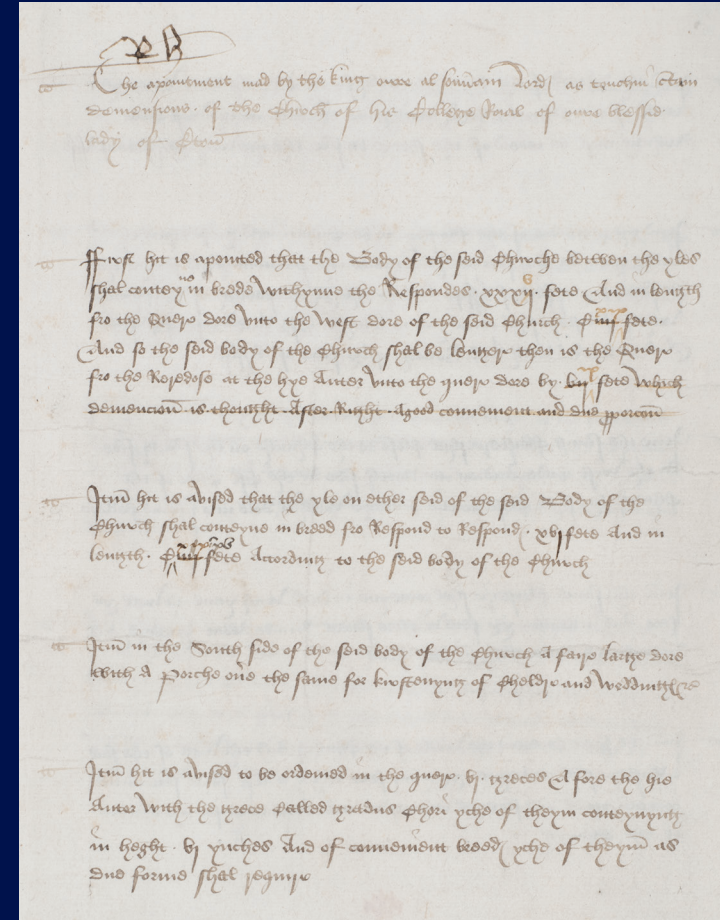
Henry and pre-rule

Henry VI was born on 6 December 1421 at Windsor Castle. He was the only child of Henry V and Catherine de Valois, youngest daughter of Charles VI of France. He would never get to meet his extraordinary father.

Henry VI was crowned King of England 6 November 1429, and of France 16 December 1431. He is the only monarch to have been crowned king of both realms. However, he would have little involvement in politics for a number of years afterwards.

Just five days before he died, Henry V made provisions for the minority years of his son in codicils added to his will on 26 August 1422. Thomas Beaufort, Duke of Exeter, was to have overall control of the young king, with responsibility for choosing his servants. Catherine was also heavily involved, and much of Henry's early life was spent in the company of women. In 1428, Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, was appointed his tutor. His mandate was to teach Henry good manners; letters; languages; to love, fear and honour God; to embrace virtue and to hate sin. Around this time, Catherine fled court and married Owen Tudor.

Henry V's brothers John, Duke of Bedford, and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, were to act in matters of state until Henry VI was of an age to rule for himself. The first 18 years of Henry's life were therefore marked by conciliar government, with day-to-day rule carried out by a group of specially selected men, governed by specific guidelines, keeping meticulous records of what was enacted in Henry's name, and with Henry merely a figurehead. This pattern would be repeated later in Henry's life.

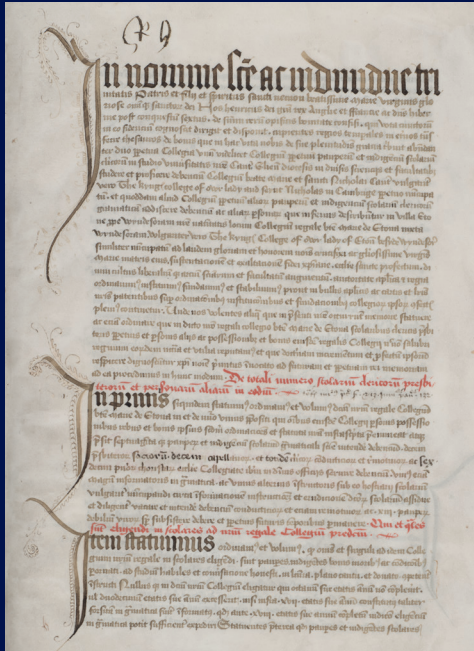


Contemporary copy of the will of Henry V, 10 June 1421, with codicils concerning government during the minority of Henry VI, 26 August 1422 [ECR 59]





The Foundation Charter establishing Eton College, 11 October 1440 [ECR 39/3] with original seal, opposite.



Liber Originalis. Signed by Henry 'RH' and originally sealed with the Great Seal, these are the earliest surviving version of the statutes that would govern Eton College, c.1452 [ECR 60/1/1]



Henry VI and Eton

The most important aspect of Henry VI's personality was his piety, and this is evident in his building projects. He founded Eton when he was just 18 years old. It was to mark the commencement of his personal rule, and be 'the first pledge of his devotion to God'. King's College, Cambridge was founded a year later, and the two have been described as the only positives to come out of his reign.

Eton College was a project of immense personal importance to Henry. The site chosen was close to his birthplace of Windsor Castle, also his favourite residence. Siting it there would mean he could keep a close eye on the proceedings. Henry was born on the feast of St Nicholas, patron saint of children, and a school for poor scholars would honour this. Unlike institutions founded by other monarchs, Henry's would focus on education and youth.

The Foundation Charter sketches out Henry's vision, while reserving for himself the right to change things in the future. The foundation stone was laid by Henry himself, and many of the documents concerning the establishment of the college are signed and initialled in his own hand. Others are written in the first person, and specify that they were 'signed with my own hand'. His close personal interest in his project has no parallel in other areas of public business.

He set about providing the college with the resources needed for its future – land. In return, the college would pray for the souls of his parents. This immense financial support came at a time the royal purse was struggling due to the enduring wars in France and was an ongoing source of conflict with the leading members of government. In addition, Henry bestowed privileges, the extent of which was unknown in England at the time, even going as far as getting additional ecclesiastical privileges from the Pope, all to enhance the glory of his new college.



college chapel



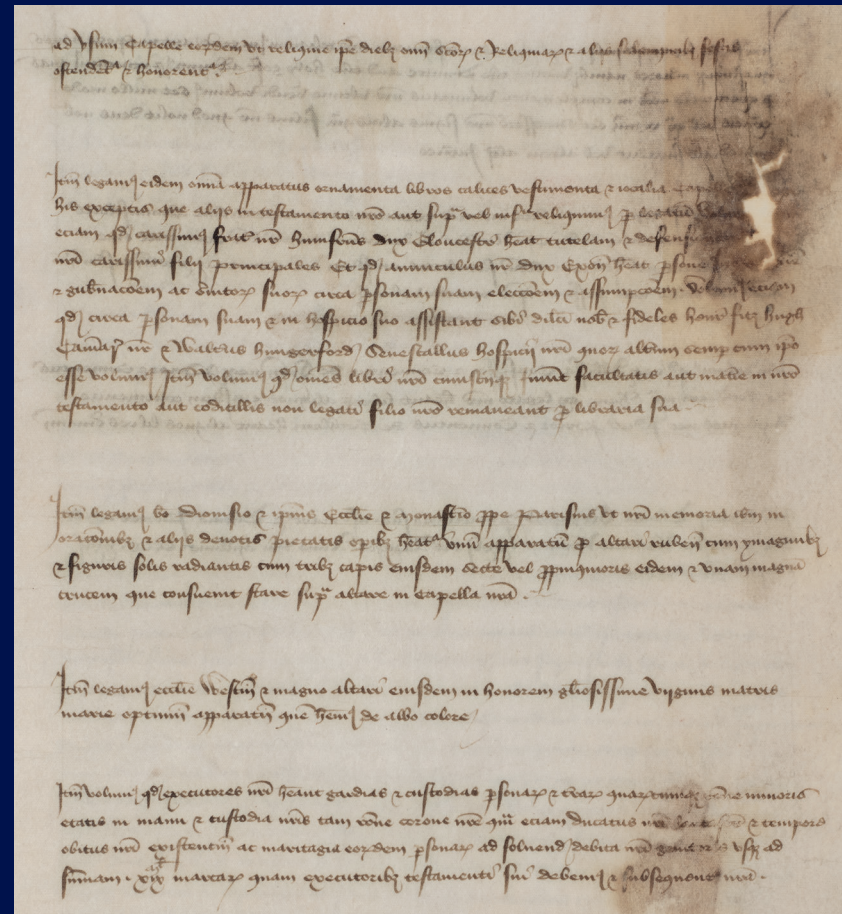
Central to Henry VI's plans for his new college was the chapel and the religious ceremonies that would be performed there. Instructions were issued detailing the exact design to be followed, and then amended several times before being finalised, with each alteration making the chapel even more grand than previously planned. The foundation stone was laid by Henry VI before Passion Sunday 1441, below the site of the future high altar.

A full complement of clergy was provided, consisting of the Provost, ten Fellows, all of whom would be priests, four clerks (singing men), and six choristers. Just a few years later, this number was increased to include ten chaplains, an additional six clerks and a further ten choristers.

Henry VI presented the college with a number of relics and jewels, including relics of St John, Prior of Bridlington, also known as John of Beverley, who held a place of special importance to the Lancastrians; pieces of the True Cross and drops of the precious blood of our Lord, reflective of the college's intended status as a place of pilgrimage.

The Statutes laid out the services to be performed, according to the Sarum ritual. The boys were to say prayers on awakening, throughout the day, and before finishing their lessons for the day. Then more before dinner, in the evening and before bed. The Statutes suggest a foundation driven by personal piety – not least in the almost obsessive concern for the prayers to be said for the founder and his parents. College Chapel would be a visible, lasting memorial of this devotion.

Statue of Henry VI by John Bacon, 1786. Henry VI is depicted with a book, and holding College Chapel [FDA-Sc.48-2017].
Image from glass plate negative, 1912 [PA-M.1:10-2015]



'For the Edificacion of the Quere of the Kyngs College of our lady there assigned by the Kyng'. Instructions for the building and design of the quire of College Chapel, signed by Henry 'RH', 7 February 1448 [ECR 39/75]





Henry and his rule

As a medieval monarch, Henry VI was expected to govern personally, to make the big decisions and to deal with matters of grace, such as pardons for crimes, wardships and petitions. The evidence suggests that Henry was not equipped to make these decisions.

‘Carelessness, lack of attention to details, and sheer incompetence’ is how his style of rule has been described.¹ Accused of leaving an unusual amount of business to others, being easily influenced by those around him and acquiescing to most demands without thought, the early years of his reign were marked by conflict with his council. In 1444, ordinances were drawn up to address the king’s generosity and restrict his decision making. Rather than taking this as an affront to his power, Henry agreed.

His father had been one of England’s greatest military leaders. Henry VI by contrast is the only king of medieval England not to lead an army in war. Rather, Henry turned to his bishops to pray for the success of his army, leaving the leading of troops to others. By July 1453, the French realm was lost. Lack of funds due to his generosity to religious foundations has been cited as one of the factors in this devastating blow to the kingdom. The earliest Statutes of Eton College date from this period, drawn up and signed by Henry, showing that Henry’s attention was elsewhere.

More devastating to the country was Henry’s mental collapse in August 1453. It was described by a contemporary chronicler thus: ‘he fell, through a sudden and unexpected fright, into such an illness that for a full year and a half he was without natural sense or intelligence adequate to administer the government’.² He would never fully recover.

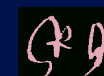
Until this point, Henry may have only been occasionally involved with matters of government, but he did and could engage when he wanted to. After his breakdown, no one could be certain whether he could. The inconsistency of rule and undue influence of others seen in his early rule increased. This uncertainty widened existing factions in government and increased the dominance of the leading political players. The Wars of the Roses, or the Cousins’ War as it was known at the time, saw the battle for control of the throne. Those supporting the Duke of York began to say Henry VI should be replaced. On 25 October 1460, the Act of Accord was passed by Parliament. Richard, Duke of York was to be the acknowledged heir, to succeed Henry on his death.



Consolidation Charter, reciting the details of grants made to Eton College and containing the earliest depiction of the two houses of Parliament, 5 March 1446 [ECR 39/57]



Coins from the reign of Henry VI, 1427 – 1430





Henry and his overthrow

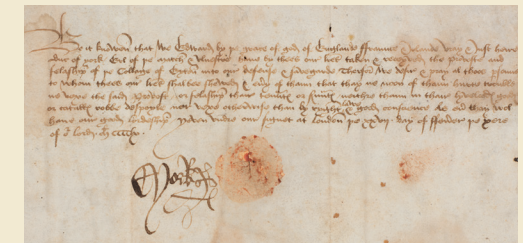
The agreement made with Richard, Duke of York, was unacceptable to the Queen, Margaret of Anjou, as it disinherited her son. The following months saw some of the bloodiest battles ever seen on English soil. Richard, Duke of York, was killed at the Battle of Wakefield in December 1460. His claim to the throne was taken up by his son, Edward.

Following the decisive battle at Towton in March 1461, Henry VI was deposed and Edward of York named as king. Contemporary writers wrote damning judgements of the former king, calling him a 'puppet of a king'³ and 'more timorous than a woman, utterly devoid of wit or spirit'.⁴

For four years, Henry hid in the north and Scotland, while his queen endeavoured to gain support from France. Eventually betrayed, Henry was captured and brought to London in June 1465, his feet tied to the stirrups of the horse he rode upon. He would remain a prisoner in the Tower for the next five years.

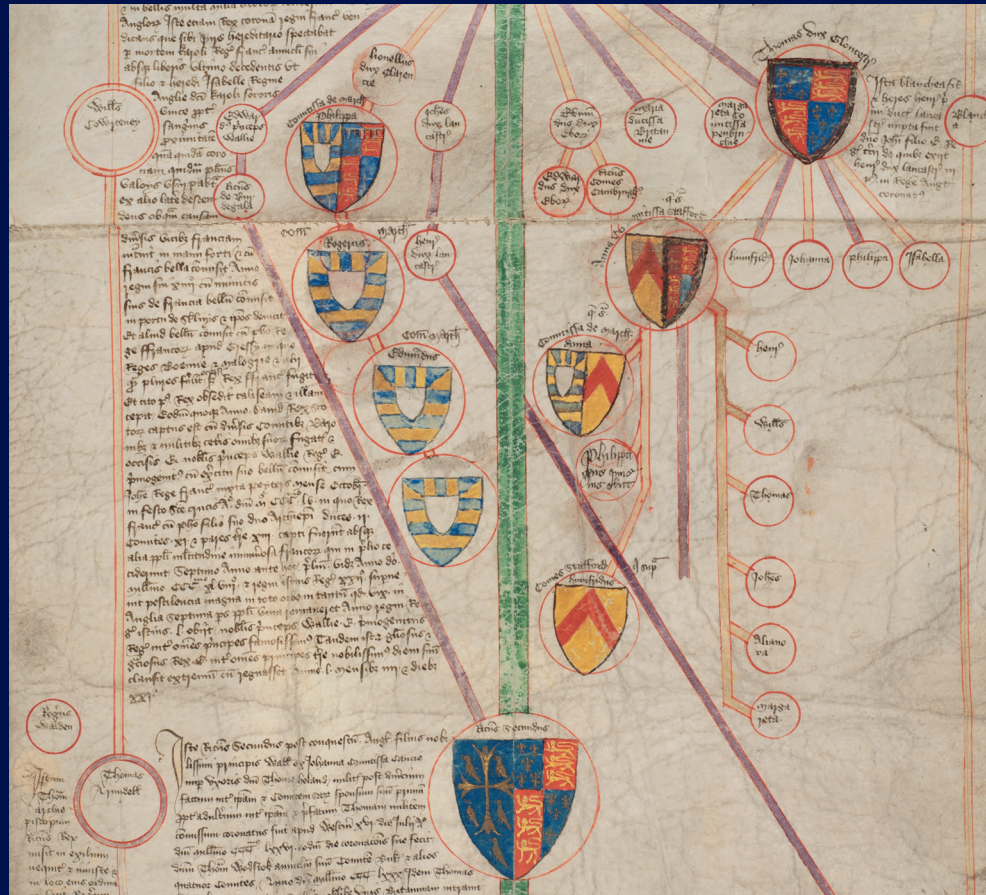
Edward IV was having no more success than Henry in maintaining the support of all those in government. His greatest ally, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick 'the kingmaker', turned his back on Edward and placed his support instead in the exiled Queen and Prince of Wales, along with Edward's own brother, the Duke of Clarence. Together they led an army from the continent and marched on London. Henry was once more in power, but was once more merely a figurehead, described as 'a stuffed wool sack lifted by his ears, a shadow on the wall, banded about as in a game of blind-man's buff, submissive and mute'.⁵

This reversal of fortune was short-lived and by April 1471, Henry was a prisoner once more. He died in the Tower on 22 May.



Letter of protection for Eton College by Edward, Duke of York, described as 'Vray and just heire', 27 February 1460/1 [ECR 39/124]

Chronicon Angliae inrotulatum, showing the sons of Edward III through whom both the House of Lancaster and House of York claimed the right to the throne, 15th century [MS 191]





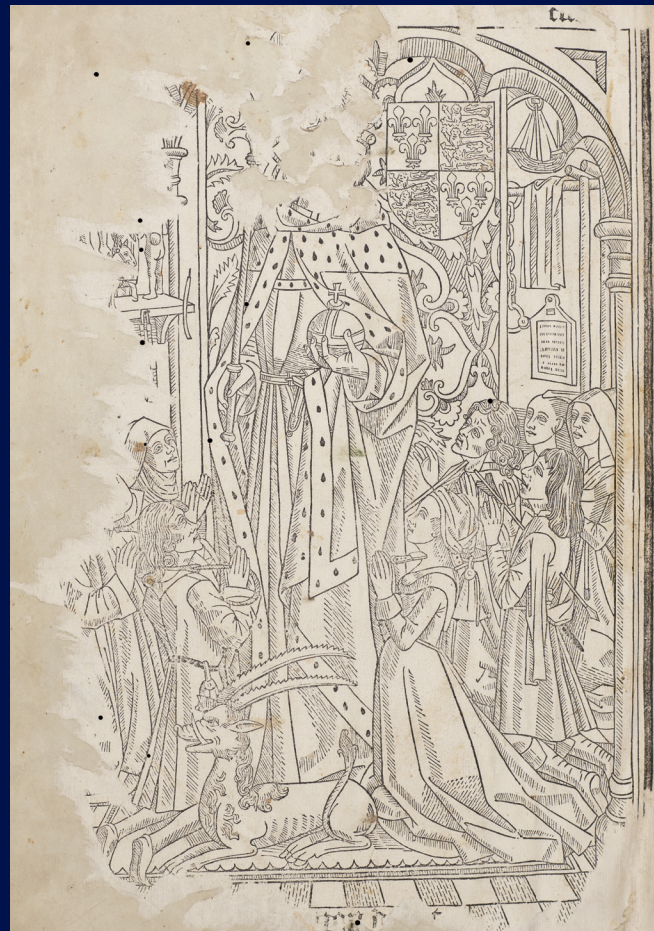
Death and the afterlife

During his lifetime, Henry VI had expressed a wish to be buried at Westminster Abbey, the burial place of his great father. Instead, Edward IV had Henry buried at Chertsey Abbey, perhaps choosing this unusual place to remove Henry from people's memories. This strategy did not work, and rumours of his demise at the hands of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, continued to circulate.

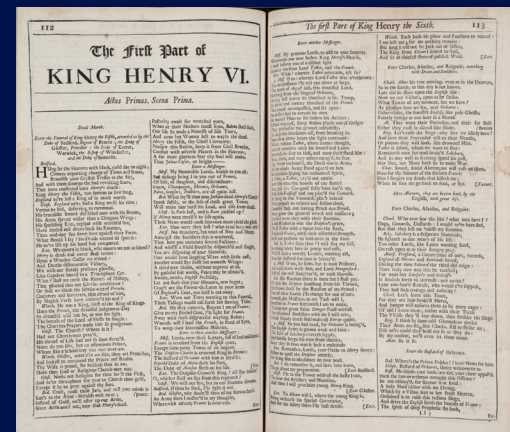
Less than two years after Henry's death, a cult in his memory had been established, with people flocking to Chertsey to pray at his tomb. It was claimed that Henry VI was granting posthumous miracles, many involving children in a continuation of his support for the young. In 1484, Richard, now Richard III, had Henry's body moved to St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, and the dean there began to record the stories of the miracles attributed to Henry. Relics of Henry VI, including his hat, which was believed to relieve migraines in those who wore it, were kept by his tomb, and a purpose-built money box installed.

Pilgrim badges were created, statues of the saintly Henry made, and his image appeared on many rood screens across the country. Canterbury is the only English shrine to have left more souvenirs. The very qualities that had made Henry a poor king in the eyes of the kingdom – generosity, piety, forgiveness – were now seen as something worthy of celebrating. He too had suffered adversity and would have sympathy with the trials and hardships of his people.

This cult was supported by the Tudors as part of their aim to legitimise their rule. Henry VII went as far as appealing to the Pope for canonisation of Henry VI as a saint. Ultimately the Reformation and break with Rome would end the cult of Henry VI.



Woodcut of pilgrims at the tomb of Henry VI at St George's Chapel, 1490 [MS. Bod. 277 fol. 376v]



"The first Part of Henry the Sixt", *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies. Published according to the true originall copies...* [Fourth Folio], 1685 [Sa2.3.19]



Endnotes

¹ James Ross, *Henry VI*, London: Allen King (2016), p. 34

² 'Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Angliae', ed. J.A. Giles, 1848; cited in Ross (2016), pp. 43-4

³ Bishop George Neville, Calendar of State Papers: Milan, I; cited in Ross (2016), p. 61

⁴ Pope Pius II, quoted in *Pope Pius II and the Wars of the Roses*, Archivum Historiae Pontificae 8 (1970); cited in Ross (2016), p. 145

⁵ Georges Chastellain, quoted in J.H. Ramsay, *Lancaster & York* (1938); cited in Ross (2016), p. 215

Acknowledgements

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