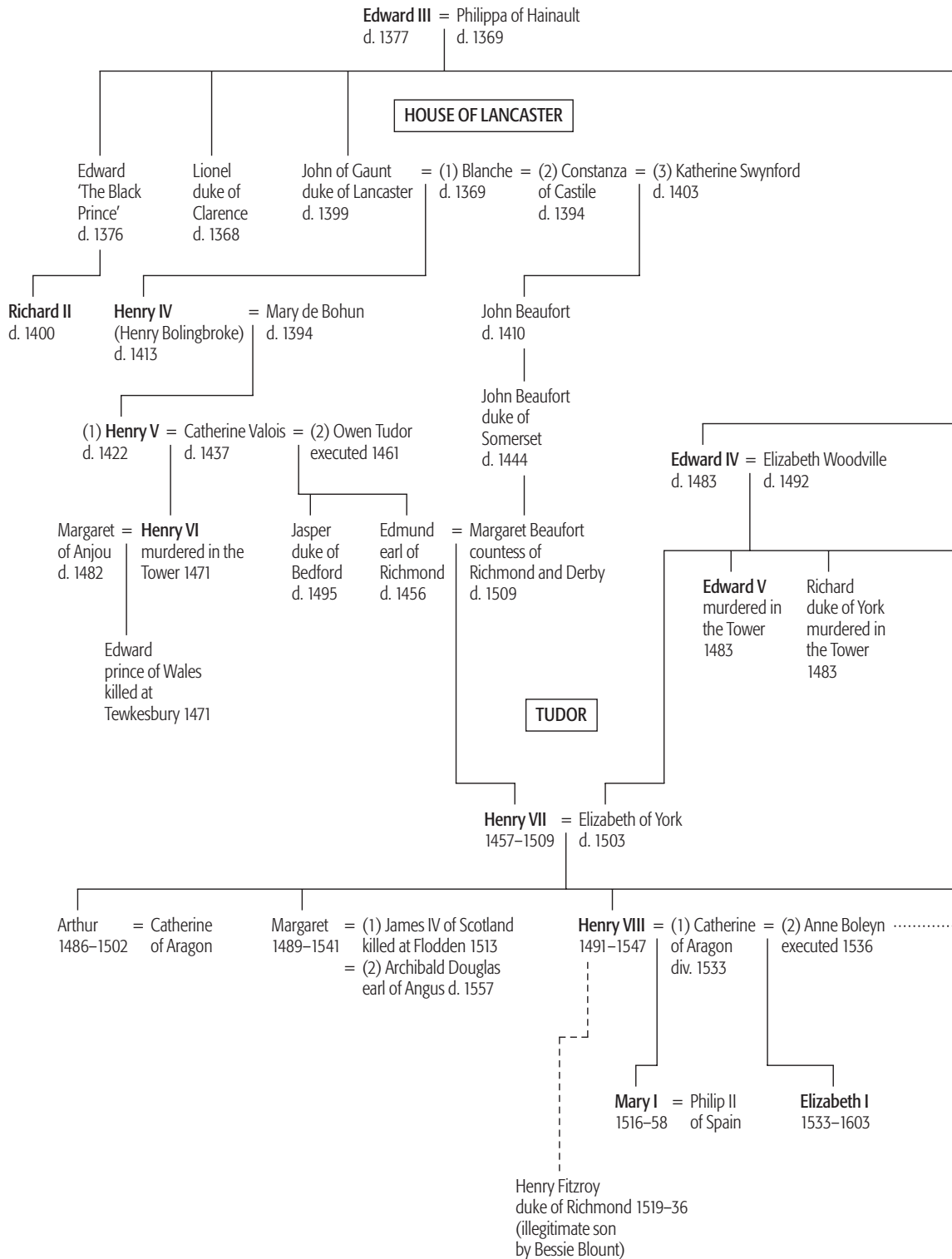# 1 Fifteenth-century kingship and the reign of Henry VI
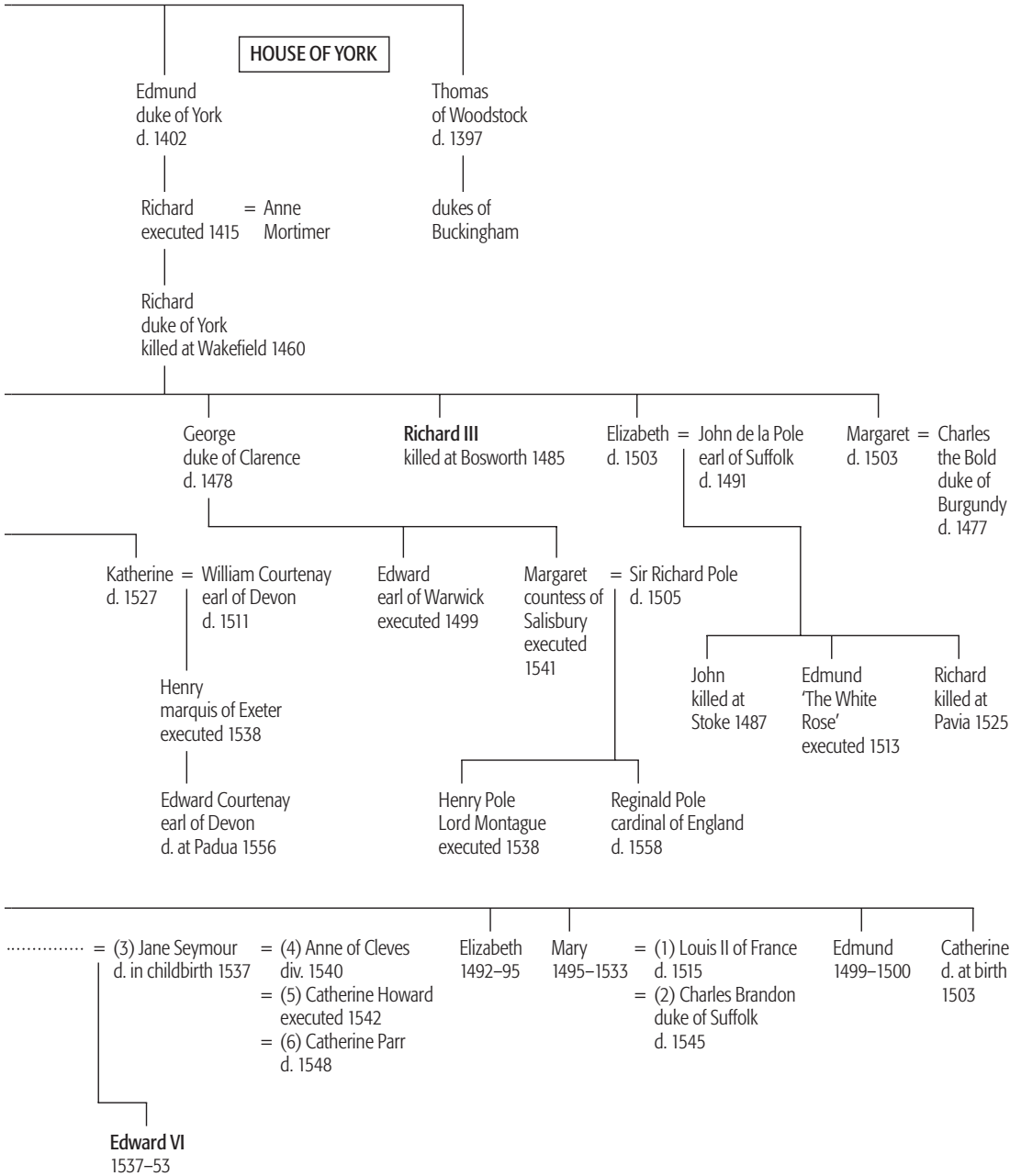
Focus questions

◆ How was England governed in the mid-fifteenth century?

◆ How strong was the monarchy before the reign of Henry VI?

◆ What factors undermined Henry VI's rule before 1455?

◆ Why was Henry VI usurped by Edward, earl of March, in 1461?

Significant dates

1421	Henry VI is born.
1422	Henry V dies, Henry VI becomes king.
1437	Henry VI's minority ends.
1444	The Truce of Tours is made with France. Henry VI is betrothed to Margaret of Anjou.
1445	Henry VI marries Margaret of Anjou.
1450	Normandy is lost to the French. Suffolk is murdered and Cade's rebellion breaks out.
1452	*February to March* the duke of York's first insurrection begins.
1453	Henry VI becomes insane. Henry VI's son and heir, Edward, prince of Wales, is born.
1454	*November* York's first protectorate begins.
1455	Henry VI recovers and York's protectorate ends. *May* The First Battle of St Albans takes place. *November* York's second protectorate begins.
1459	*September* The Battle of Blore Heath takes place. York flees to Ireland.
1460	*July* The Battle of Northampton takes place. *December* York is killed at the Battle of Wakefield.
1461	*February* The Battle of Mortimer's Cross takes place. Queen Margaret defeats the Yorkists at the Second Battle of St Albans. Edward IV usurps the throne. *March* Edward IV defeats the Lancastrians at the Battle of Towton.

Edward III = Philippa of Hainault
d. 1377 | d. 1369

HOUSE OF LANCASTER

Edward 'The Black Prince' d. 1376

Lionel duke of Clarence d. 1368

John of Gaunt duke of Lancaster d. 1399 = (1) Blanche d. 1369 = (2) Constanza of Castile d. 1394 = (3) Katherine Swynford d. 1403

Richard II d. 1400

Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke) d. 1413 = Mary de Bohun d. 1394

John Beaufort d. 1410

John Beaufort duke of Somerset d. 1444

(1) Henry V d. 1422 = Catherine Valois d. 1437 = (2) Owen Tudor executed 1461

Edward IV d. 1483 = Elizabeth Woodville d. 1492

Margaret of Anjou d. 1482 = Henry VI murdered in the Tower 1471

Jasper duke of Bedford d. 1495

Edmund earl of Richmond d. 1456 = Margaret Beaufort countess of Richmond and Derby d. 1509

Edward V murdered in the Tower 1483

Richard duke of York murdered in the Tower 1483

Edward prince of Wales killed at Tewkesbury 1471

TUDOR

Henry VII 1457–1509 = Elizabeth of York d. 1503

Arthur 1486–1502 = Catherine of Aragon

Margaret 1489–1541 = (1) James IV of Scotland killed at Flodden 1513 = (2) Archibald Douglas earl of Angus d. 1557

Henry VIII 1491–1547 = (1) Catherine of Aragon div. 1533 = (2) Anne Boleyn executed 1536

Mary I 1516–58 = Philip II of Spain

Elizabeth I 1533–1603

Henry Fitzroy duke of Richmond 1519–36 (illegitimate son by Bessie Blount)

The houses of York, Lancaster and Tudor.

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HOUSE OF YORK

Edmund
duke of York
d. 1402

Thomas
of Woodstock
d. 1397

Richard = Anne
executed 1415 Mortimer

dukes of
Buckingham

Richard
duke of York
killed at Wakefield 1460

George
duke of Clarence
d. 1478

Richard III
killed at Bosworth 1485

Elizabeth = John de la Pole
d. 1503 earl of Suffolk
d. 1491

Margaret = Charles
d. 1503 the Bold
duke of
Burgundy
d. 1477

Katherine = William Courtenay
d. 1527 earl of Devon
d. 1511

Edward
earl of Warwick
executed 1499

Margaret = Sir Richard Pole
countess of d. 1505
Salisbury
executed
1541

John
killed at
Stoke 1487

Edmund
'The White
Rose'
executed 1513

Richard
killed at
Pavia 1525

Henry
marquis of Exeter
executed 1538

Edward Courtenay
earl of Devon
d. at Padua 1556

Henry Pole
Lord Montague
executed 1538

Reginald Pole
cardinal of England
d. 1558

.... = (3) Jane Seymour
d. in childbirth 1537

= (4) Anne of Cleves
div. 1540

= (5) Catherine Howard
executed 1542

= (6) Catherine Parr
d. 1548

Elizabeth
1492–95

Mary
1495–1533

= (1) Louis II of France
d. 1515

= (2) Charles Brandon
duke of Suffolk
d. 1545

Edmund
1499–1500

Catherine
d. at birth
1503

Edward VI
1537–53

Overview

> The reign of Henry VI has strong claims to be considered the most
> calamitous in the whole of English history.
>
> B. P. Wolffe, 'The personal rule of Henry VI', in S. B. Chrimes, C. D. Ross and R. A.
> Griffiths (eds.), *Fifteenth-century England 1399–1509*, Stroud, 1972

Henry VI (1421–71) was the third and last of the Lancastrian monarchs, king
of England and, for a time, France. The first, Henry IV, had been the duke of
Lancaster – hence the adjective 'Lancastrian' which is used to describe his
dynasty and its supporters.

The first misfortune of Henry VI's reign was that it began in 1422 in his
early infancy, although his formal coronation was delayed until 1429, shortly
before his eighth birthday. A strong council of 17 nevertheless governed effect-
ively during Henry's minority in spite of '**protector**' duke of Gloucester's
attempts to extend his own authority. On coming of age in 1437, however, Henry
proved inept. He was too forgiving towards high-profile offenders, showed too
much favouritism to the ruling elite and he imposed high levels of taxation. All
these faults were listed among the king's shortcomings by his contemporaries.

The contrast between the stability of Henry's minority and the disasters of
the reign after he came of age is striking. From 1437 to 1450 he played the
central role in creating a situation in which once-loyal subjects were driven to
contemplating that most terrible of crimes – the deposition of their anointed
king.

Worst of all, perhaps, Henry VI was blamed for undoing Henry V's greatest
achievement by losing almost all of the huge French empire his father had
gained after his victory at Agincourt in 1415.

Henry VI became king of France on the death of his maternal grandfather,
Charles VI of France, whose daughter, Catherine, had married Henry V in
accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Troyes of 1420. He only made one
single boyhood visit to this troubled second kingdom in which, from about
1429, the spirit of French nationalism threatened to cast out the English pres-
ence. In May 1430, both Henry and the recently captured Joan of Arc were in
English-held Rouen. Henry made his way to Paris and Notre Dame Cathedral
to be crowned king of France while Joan of Arc, convicted as a witch, stayed in
Rouen to face execution by burning at the stake. Henry's formal coronation
was an attempt to counter the crowning of a French claimant to the throne,
Charles VII, in the previous year. For 15 years, Charles VII was accepted only
in the south and centre while the English king retained Paris, Aquitaine and
much of the north.

Two humiliating defeats, Formigny in 1450 and Castillon in 1453, helped
push the English out of Aquitaine and Normandy. By 1461 a single outpost,

protector Whereas
regents were granted
virtually full authority to act
as king, protectors were
more accountable for their
actions. Henry VI's youth
made it necessary to create
this office and his first
protectors were his uncles,
John of Lancaster and
Humphrey of Gloucester,
between 1422 and 1429.
During his breakdown from
1454 to 1455, Richard of
York claimed the position.
When Edward IV died in
1483 Richard of
Gloucester stepped in as
protector for his brother's
son, Edward V, prior to
usurping the throne.

On the death of his grandfather, Charles VI of France, in October 1422, Henry VI was proclaimed King Henry II of France. This painting shows his coronation eight years later.

Calais and its **Pale**, remained. It was finally relinquished in 1558 during the reign of Mary I, although English monarchs continued to claim a title to the French throne until 1802.

Careless in his use of the royal **patronage**, Henry showed particular favour to the dukes of Somerset and Suffolk, giving them titles, land and favours, while denying the same to other great and powerful families. Among these was Richard, duke of York, a descendant of Edward III, who, before the birth of Henry's son in 1453, was regarded by many as the legitimate heir to the throne.

The fact that Richard of York was ignored in this way, together with the king's general misfortunes and personal weaknesses, resulted in rebellion. Thus began the first of the **Wars of the Roses** – 30 years of intermittent warfare which, in 1461, ended the reign of Henry VI and, finally, in 1485, destroyed the Lancastrian dynasty.

Pale The Pale was the land around the town of Calais that was under English control. Similarly, the land around Dublin under English control was called the Dublin Pale.

patronage A patron is one who holds the power of appointing others to offices or titles, many of which have privileges of various kinds attached to them. The king, as patron, could use his powers of patronage by giving offices and titles to his friends or supporters.

Wars of the Roses The term 'Wars of the Roses' was coined in the nineteenth century by Sir Walter Scott. War between 1455 and 1485 was not continuous and historians now see these events as a series of separate wars rather than a single lasting conflict.

How was England governed in the mid-fifteenth century?

Kings and kingdoms

scrofula Scrofula was an unpleasant skin disease which it was commonly believed could be cured by the touch of the monarch.

Kingship by the fifteenth century had acquired a mystical quality; kings were not like other men: their touch alone could cure **scrofula** and it had become customary to approach them on bended knee and address them as 'Majesty'. It was assumed that kings ruled by 'divine right', that is that they were appointed by God – a belief emphasised by the fact that they were anointed with holy oil at their coronation. There was a general acceptance of the concept of the 'royal prerogative', the monarch's right to rule, in such areas as foreign policy, by issuing proclamations which had the force of law. However, it was generally accepted that the king should consult a parliament before making new statute laws or imposing new taxes.

The king's strength in the fifteenth century lay in the combination of traditional respect for his authority with the fact that the nobility depended on royal patronage. The traditional feudal bonds between king and subject were largely broken down by the later Middle Ages. Loyalty was only likely when it was in each party's mutual interest. As the king was the richest man in the kingdom and had power to bestow positions and other gifts on those he chose to patronise, he was well equipped to gain the service and support of the nobility.

The mystique of monarchy was reinforced by the stories associated with its lineage. English kings claimed an ancestry that included King Arthur, the Emperor Constantine and the great-grandson of Aeneas of Troy. These enduring legends were written down as 'history' in about 1130 by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the kings of Britain*.

The kingdom which the later-fifteenth-century monarchs ruled, in effect, was made up of England, Wales and a part of Ireland – Dublin and the area around it known as the Pale. Assumptions were made regarding the ancient allegiance owed to the English crown by the Welsh, Irish and Scottish, but these were not really enough to unite all the peoples of the British Isles. Much of Ireland and all of Scotland were fiercely independent and frequently in conflict with England. Despite its 'conquest' in the twelfth century, most of Ireland was not subdued and certainly not anglicised despite the influence of certain Anglo-Irish families. Here the English king's title was that merely of 'lord of Ireland'. The Welsh **Marcher lords** and the northern earls enjoyed a good deal of autonomy too, having secured privileges, 'liberties', in return for their loyalty and willingness to defend the king's most vulnerable borders.

Marcher lords The Marches were the border regions between England and Wales, and England and Scotland. Since Norman times, these troublesome areas had been placed under the jurisdiction of Marcher lordships. The Marcher lords had a long tradition of independence and, during the fifteenth century, they posed a considerable threat to England's kings. The Act of Welsh Union with England (1536, 1543) finally curbed the powers of the mighty Welsh Marcher lords.

Henry V had won a second kingdom for English kings after defeating the French at Agincourt in 1415. This kingdom comprised half of France, but all

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except Calais and its Pale was lost by 1453. The war in which it was lost, the Hundred Years' War, probably encouraged a sense of national identity and encouraged a cultural cohesion within the realm. French, a language long cultivated by the English nobility, went into decline in England as English fortress towns in France were recaptured by French armies. Until Calais was lost in 1558, English kings were active in asserting their French dynastic claims. Calais was an immensely important outpost during the period since it provided the main port through which English cloth entered continental Europe.

What were the foundations of the king's power in the fifteenth century?

The council

The king's council was the body on which the monarch was most reliant for advice. Traditionally it comprised some of the greatest **magnates**, but stronger medieval kings also surrounded themselves with advisers who were capable, yet could claim no 'natural' right to enjoy the privilege of joining the king's inner sanctum. A strong council was necessary during the minorities of both Richard II and Henry VI until they came of age. The turbulent years of the second half of the fifteenth century, moreover, encouraged a less informal relationship between king and council, as monarchs with a fragile power base tried to strengthen their position. Thus the king's council became more of a permanent institution during the fifteenth century.

magnates Magnates were the most powerful nobles of all.

Parliament

In medieval England, parliament was already divided into two chambers: the Lords (the upper house) and the Commons (the lower house). Those sitting in the latter were representatives of the shires and boroughs, elected from 1429 by freeholders worth 40 shillings a year in land. Two knights were selected for each shire and two burgesses for each borough, in all totalling around three hundred. The members of the upper house were the heads of the great landowning families. By the fifteenth century, the two houses had evolved into vitally important elements in the process of England's government. Parliament acted as an advisory body to the monarch, administered and could act as a court of law. The Commons was valuable to the crown for its ability to approve and give its consent to taxation proposals. The Commons, in return, presented petitions to the crown regarding issues considered to be of common interest. Monarchs had the right to accept or reject petitions but they could not alter them.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the struggle between king and parliament for the authority to govern was an old one. In the 1380s, parliament for a time triumphed over King Richard II, by calling for the arrest, trial and punishment of those royal favourites thought to be responsible for a

Fifteenth-century kingship and the reign of Henry VI **7**

despotic approach to government which neglected the traditional involvement of the council and Commons. Led by the 'Lords Appellant' – so called because they 'appealed' (accused) five of the king's closest advisers of treason, the 'Merciless Parliament' of 1388 initiated a full-scale purge of the royal household.

The law and local administration

Time-honoured customs were the substance of common law – a law based on precedent in the form of written or reported statements of judges. Some laws (statutes) were always written down and usually came from parliament. Common law and statute law were enforced by the king's courts, King's Bench and Common Pleas, both of which usually sat at Westminster. Their work in the counties was carried out by itinerant judges through such institutions as courts of assize. In some areas lords of manors still held their own private 'manorial' courts for the handling of their tenants' minor misdemeanours, and many towns had the equivalent by which the town corporation could try cases involving such matters as weights and measures in the market place, the pollution of waterways, the maintenance of fences and ditches, and the creation of dunghills. All over the country there were 'liberties' – places where the king had handed over full judicial authority to a local magnate. Cases involving issues like divorce and the reading of wills were still the province of the church and its courts. Cases that could not be resolved by common law or statute law were heard in Chancery. The system was, therefore, complex to say the least and corruption was rife.

The single most important legal and administrative post in the provinces during the fifteenth century was that of justice of the peace (JP). These JPs were nominated and unpaid. From 1363 they were required to hold sessions four times a year. At these quarter sessions, minor cases were resolved and more serious ones were brought to trial, perhaps at the county court presided over by the sheriff. Details of the sessions were recorded by the JP's 'clerk of the peace'. JPs also had the right to arrest people accused of a breach of the peace.

What was the difference between common law and statute law?

How strong was the monarchy before the reign of Henry VI?

The study of history has much to do with cause and effect. Modern historians seek explanations for events and reflect upon how one chain of events led to another. In their studies historians identify short-term and long-term factors. These might then be arranged into a hierarchy of importance. The history of the second half of the fifteenth century can only be fully understood when it is set in the context of a broad chronology. This section outlines the histories

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of the reigns of the four kings who ruled England before Henry VI. The dramatic developments that occurred in his reign are rooted in the reigns of his predecessors.

The reign of Edward III, 1327–77

The origins of the Wars of the Roses, the struggles between the houses of York and Lancaster and between York and Tudor during the second half of the fifteenth century, have been traced by some historians to the reign of Edward III. In 1328 Edward laid claim to the French throne when Charles IV died. Edward's mother was the sister of Charles but, according to French custom, which did not recognise inheritance through the female line, the throne had been granted to Edward's cousin, Philip of Valois. In the continuing wars against France, which Edward had begun in 1337, England was victorious at Sluys (1340), Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356). Although much of the territory won was subsequently lost, England held five French towns and the Calais Pale on Edward's death. As well as providing his kingdom with a claim to the French throne Edward also produced 13 children, some of whose descendants, ultimately, would wage war with one another in pursuit of the crown. Five of his sons were married to rich heiresses and became some of the most powerful magnates in the kingdom.

The reign of Richard II, 1377–99

Edward's eldest son, Edward, the Black Prince, died before his father and the throne was inherited by his nine-year-old son, Richard II. Unlike his prolific grandfather, Richard died in 1400 without children. Richard II's choice of unpopular and incompetent advisers, the fact that he sometimes ignored parliamentary decrees and his unspectacular foreign policy turned powerful members of the nobility against his regime. In 1387 the Lords Appellant rose against the king's favourite, Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford, and defeated him at the Battle of Radcot Bridge in Oxfordshire. The earl escaped and fled abroad, to die a few years later after being gored by a boar while out hunting. His estates were confiscated and he was condemned to death by the so-called 'Merciless Parliament' of 1388.

Cowed by the actions of the Lords Appellant in 1387, Richard ruled for a time with restraint and he was fairer in his patronage of the aristocracy. By the late 1390s, however, he had reverted to his former practice and worse. He determined to rule without parliament, considered himself the font of law, promoted a new and unpopular favourite, his cousin Edward, earl of Rutland, and began plotting his revenge upon the Lords Appellant. Murders, arrests and executions followed. His cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, the son of John of Gaunt – the mightiest of England's magnates – was banished for ten years in

> How did Richard II manage to turn most of the nobles against him?

Owen Glendower
Owen Glendower led the last major revolt against English rule in Wales. In the first decade of the fifteenth century, the castles of Harlech and Aberystwyth were held by the rebels, and Welsh parliaments met in 1404 and 1405. Henry IV regained control after 1408, although Glendower remained at large, fermenting further rebellion, until his death around the year 1416.

Lollard Lollard was a term of abuse for a follower of the preacher, John Wycliffe. He attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby the bread and wine taken at mass are thought to turn into Christ's flesh and blood when consecrated by the priest. Lollards opposed clerical riches, believing the most truly Christian priest was a poor one, and they wanted the common people to have access to the Bible. In the 1390s, Wycliffe produced an English translation of the Scriptures. During the fifteenth century, Lollard beliefs were regarded as heretical by the authorities and Lollards risked the punishment of death by burning.

1398. When his father died the next year, Bolingbroke's vast estate was confiscated and distributed to the king's favourites.

On 4 July 1399, Bolingbroke, the new duke of Lancaster, returned to England with a few hundred supporters, determined to win back his inheritance. Richard II was abroad in Ireland and Bolingbroke met no resistance as he began to gather an army around him. When Richard returned, arriving in south Wales in late July, he found himself deserted by his uncle, Gaunt's brother, the duke of York. Even Rutland now abandoned him and pledged his support to Lancaster. In despair Richard fled to Conway Castle. Persuaded to surrender he was then taken to London and placed in the Tower. Here he was forced to abdicate and, on 29 September 1399, he gave up his throne. This was now to be occupied by Henry Bolingbroke. Thus began the reign of Henry IV, the first king of the House of Lancaster.

The reign of Henry IV, 1399–1413

A plot to rescue Richard II from the Tower prompted Henry to have him murdered in February 1400. His dubious claim to the throne, financial difficulties and **Owen Glendower**'s nationalist revolt in Wales made for a perilous start to Henry's reign. In 1403 he was almost dethroned by the mighty Percy family, rebelling in alliance with Glendower. Although they had helped Henry snatch the crown from Richard II in 1399, they now claimed they had supported him in his recovery of his Lancastrian inheritance but never intended to promote his seizure of the throne or the killing of the king. In fact it is more likely that they sought revenge on Henry, who had failed to provide them with the rich rewards they expected in return for their support. Lack of organisation among the rebels' leaders saved Henry, who defeated them at the Battles of Shrewsbury (1403) and Bramham Moor (1408).

The last years of Henry's reign saw peace which, by reducing his financial demands, improved his relationship with parliament, but during this time he suffered from chronic ill-health. He died in 1413 at the age of 46, to be succeeded by his eldest son, Henry.

The reign of Henry V, 1413–22

Within a few months of his accession, Henry V faced a rising led by Sir John Oldcastle. Although a personal friend of the new king, Oldcastle had run into trouble, having been revealed as a closet **Lollard**. His desperate endeavour to save himself by engineering a coup against the king was unsuccessful and he went into hiding, a wanted man for the combined crimes of blasphemy and treason. After three years he was captured, hanged and burned in 1417.