



War of the Roses - BBC Article

During the second half of the 15th century, the people of England witnessed three regional revolts, 13 full-scale battles, ten coups d'états, 15 invasions, five usurpations, five kings, seven reigns, and five changes of dynasty. Little wonder then that the Wars of the Roses – the name given to the exceptional period of instability that occurred between 1450 and 1500 – have long been regarded as one of the most compelling and, above all, confusing, periods of British history.

If there's two facts that people know about the Wars of the Roses, it is that they pitched the Red Rose of the House of Lancaster against the White Rose of the House of York – and that they dragged on for a very long time, taking almost a century to peter out. Fewer people will be aware that the conflict was sparked by a cataclysmic train of events in 1450 that saw England blighted by a massive slump, a government quite without credit, defeat abroad, a parliamentary revolt and a popular rebellion. It was an inability to resolve these issues over the following ten years that brought the Yorkists and Lancastrians to blows.

The Wars of the Roses are best conceived as three individual conflicts:

The First War, from 1459–61, witnessed the Yorkist Edward IV (1461–83) overthrowing the Lancastrian Henry VI (1422–61).

The Second War, from 1469–71, led to the restoration of Henry VI in 1470, but ended with Edward I back on the throne in 1471.

The Third War, from 1483 until at least 1487, saw Edward IV's son Edward V (1483) deposed by the new king's uncle, Richard III (1483–5), who was himself defeated at Bosworth in 1485 by the first Tudor king, Henry VII (1485–1509). Enemies of the new Tudor dynasty continued to scheme until 1525 – though, in the eyes of the paranoid Henry VIII (1509–47), the threat remained until 1541.

Campaigning took place for about 60 weeks of the 30 year period. The three principal wars consisted of lightning campaigns that were resolved quickly on the field of battle. Each of these battles bears a name, and we know roughly where they happened. Modern archaeological surveys have revealed scatterings of artefacts on the fields of Towton and Bosworth, but nothing much to see. There were very few sieges: London was threatened three times and the Tower of London taken twice. For long periods, 1461–69, 1471–83, and after 1485, most of the kingdom – all the south, Midlands, East Anglia and West Country – was at peace. As civil conflicts, the Wars of the Roses were notable in that they did not produce widespread destruction and economic recession. The participants lacked the necessary muscle for prolonged warfare and could only have developed it, or resorted to terror tactics, at the expense of alienating public opinion.

So how did the wars start? The clash between Henry VI and Richard Duke of York at Ludford Bridge in 1459 is sometimes cited as their opening act. Richard had long opposed the king but was routed at Ludford and died in 1460. However, his allies soon declared Henry – who had suffered mental illness – unfit to rule. In 1461 they replaced him with York’s son, Edward IV, and confined Henry to the Tower.

At first, Edward ruled through his elder cousin, Warwick (the Kingmaker), and then through a series of favourites. Prominent among them was William Herbert, the new ruler of Wales, whose power was soon seen as a threat to Warwick. In fact, it was largely to destroy Herbert that Warwick and Edward’s brother, Clarence, rebelled in 1469, deposing Edward and returning Henry to the throne.

But Edward wasn’t gone for long. He recovered his crown in 1471 – after destroying his enemies at Tewkesbury – and ruled for a further 12, relatively stable years. During this time, he moved between his palaces in the Thames Valley, settled on Windsor for his burial and embarked on the reconstruction of St George’s Chapel as the spiritual heart of the house of York. He dispatched his eldest son, Edward Prince of Wales, to Ludlow Castle to govern Wales, and saw to it that his brother, Richard Duke of Gloucester, became lord of the north.

This period of peace was to come to an abrupt end on Edward’s death in 1483. The king’s son and successor, Edward V, was deposed and consigned to the Tower by the Duke of Gloucester, who was himself to meet a violent death as Richard III two years later. Richard may not have reigned long but he did have time to transfer Henry VI’s body to St George’s Chapel in a symbolic act of reconciliation with the Lancastrian line. That wasn’t enough to stop the bloodshed. In 1485, at the battle of Bosworth, Richard was killed and Henry VII (nephew of Henry VI) became the first Tudor king.

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Questions

1. From whom were the two sides in the War of the Roses descended?
2. In what way is the idea of a continuous “War” of the Roses misleading?
3. Which kings ruled during this period and how were each deposed?
4. Did any of the kings manage to pass on their thrones to their heirs?
5. What do you think was meant by an “over mighty subject”. Can you give an example?
6. In what way might the war be seen as a conflict confined to the elites of English society?
7. Does the war suggest that the English crown was in a weakened position during this period?
8. How did the war come to an end in 1485?