

A Simple Guide to the Wars of the Roses, by Mark Battye

The Wars of the Roses is considered by some to be a complicated period of History, and with so many people called Henry, Richard and Edward it's no wonder students find it confusing. So this simple guide is my attempt at explaining what happened, and is aimed at those of you who don't know much about it, or those who might be interested in teaching it. And to keep it simple I'm only including the interesting bits.

Once upon a time in America

Anyone over the age of 30 will remember watching Dallas and Dynasty in the 1980s. For the benefit of younger teachers or any students reading this, they were both hugely popular American television series with one thing in common... they were based around rich and powerful feuding families. They say blood is thicker than water but in the Carrington and Ewing families trouble was never far from home. These shows had more than their fair share of pantomime villains and were famous for their cliff-hangers such as 'Who shot JR?'



Rose Wars



So, what does the Wars of the Roses have in common with these US TV shows? Well, the Wars of the Roses is just like a medieval version of Dynasty or Dallas, featuring a rich and powerful, yet dysfunctional family, the Plantagenets, split into two warring factions, the Houses of York and Lancaster. Cue lots of fighting between brothers and cousins, nephews and uncles. There's a fabulous cast of characters including a mentally insane king and his power-hungry wife, a man who had the power to make and break kings, and a treacherous uncle who may or may not have been responsible for the ultimate historical cliff-hanger: 'Who killed the Princes in the Tower?'

The baby king

Our story begins with a baby called Henry. Henry became the youngest person ever to succeed to the English throne, aged only 9 months, when his dad, the King, died. Baby Henry's dad was called Henry V. He was a famous warrior king who battered the French at Agincourt then died of dysentery at the age of 35. This meant that baby Henry became King Henry VI in 1422. Unfortunately for baby Henry, he inherited none of his dad's fighting spirit, and he struggled with the pressures associated with ruling a kingdom. After losing most of his dad's hard-earned French lands he suffered the first of many mental breakdowns, believed to be 'catatonic schizophrenia' (try spelling that from memory!) which left him speechless and unable to communicate for over a year. Henry VI was effectively unfit to rule and some people thought they could do a better job than him. Some people even felt they had more of a right to be king.



A family at war



To fully understand why the Wars of the Roses happened we need to go way back to the time of baby Henry's grandad... you've guessed it... Henry IV. Because baby Henry's grandad stole the throne from his cousin Richard II, who he had imprisoned and murdered. Naturally, not everyone was pleased with his grandad for usurping the throne and the Plantagenet family split into two rival groups: the House of Lancaster which was Henry's side of the family, and the House of York which opposed them. Henry's grandad spent much of his time fighting off rebellion and Henry V's exploits in France served as a useful diversion until his untimely death. The past finally caught up with Henry VI though, and he lacked the strength to fight off his rivals. During the years 1455-85 the Houses of York and Lancaster would do battle for power and for the ultimate prize; the throne England. Here starts the Wars of the Roses.

The madness of king Henry

When Henry VI suffered his first major mental breakdown in 1453 he was unable to communicate with the wider world and a 'protector' needed to be found who could rule the Kingdom in his place. Step forward Henry's closest male relative and heir to the throne, Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York (this means he was from the rival House of York). With Henry childless and in a catatonic state Richard must have thought everything was coming up roses until Henry's wife, Queen Margaret, miraculously managed to conceive a son (although how she achieved this feat is a matter of murky speculation).



As well as being beautiful, Queen Margaret (of Anjou) was made of stern stuff and she persuaded everyone that she should be in charge, not Richard. After a brief power struggle Margaret won and Richard went off with his tail between his legs to raise an army.

Margaret strikes back



The first battle which marks the beginning of the Wars of the Roses took place in St Albans in 1455. After the battle Henry wasn't defeated but he'd certainly been given a bloody nose by Richard, who was reinstated as Protector. Henry went insane and organised a Loveday which sounds rather exciting but instead was a fake reconciliation between the Houses of York and Lancaster to say sorry for killing each other at St Albans. But Henry's wife Margaret was not reconciled and having had her nose put out of joint by Richard's reinstatement, she plotted her revenge.

At what became known as the Parliament of the Devils (interestingly, held in Coventry rather than London), she accused Richard of being a traitor. Richard and his supporters were backed into a corner and had no option but to come out fighting.

The Kingmaker

Luckily, Richard, Duke of York had a powerful friend in Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick who is nicknamed 'the Kingmaker' for reasons that will become clear. Warwick came to the support of Richard bringing 2,000 soldiers and after a quick battle in Northampton in 1460, the Lancastrians were defeated and the now insane King, Henry VI, was captured. Richard, victorious, came to London to persuade people that he should be king instead and reminded everyone that Henry's grandad had stolen the throne from his grandad many years before. Unfortunately for Richard, nobody would let him usurp the throne but he did at least manage to get Margaret of Anjou banished for life, and Henry's son and heir Prince Edward disinherited. And so it was agreed, that on Henry VI's death, Richard of York would be King.



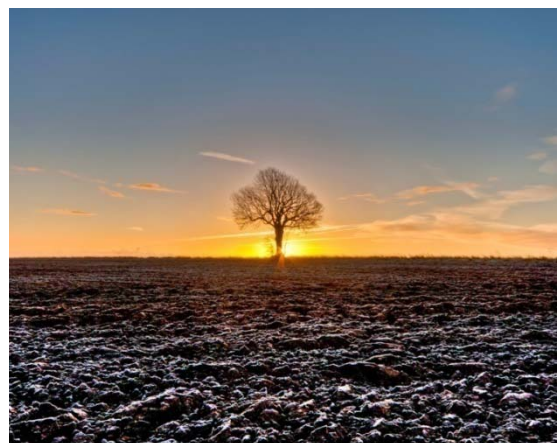
Death in Wakefield



Margaret of Anjou didn't take the news about her son's disinheritance at all well and Richard had no choice but to face her in battle. Unfortunately for him, he lost and his head was chopped off and displayed in the city of York wearing a paper crown. All Margaret had to do now was rescue King Henry VI from Warwick's forces which she did during the Second Battle of St Albans.

Battle of Towton

On hearing of Richard of York's death his 18 year old son, Edward Earl of March, was not happy. What followed was the largest pitched battle ever to have taken place on English soil. On Palm Sunday, 1461, almost 10 per cent of all the men in England of military age met to do battle near the Yorkshire village of Towton and it's believed that almost 28,000 died. Towton was to be a decisive battle in the Wars of the Roses. The victor, Edward Earl of March became King Edward IV of England, and the Yorkists were now in the ascendancy. And Henry VI went on the run.



The fellowship of the King



King Edward IV's first reign lasted for 9 years during which time he managed to secretly marry Elizabeth Woodville, the first commoner to marry an English sovereign. He then fell out with his friend, the hugely powerful Earl of Warwick, over his choice of bride and foreign policy. But Warwick wasn't known as the Kingmaker for nothing, and in 1469 he staged a rebellion in an attempt to oust Edward and replace him with George, Duke of Clarence (who was Edward's younger brother and married to Warwick's eldest daughter). But Warwick's rebellion failed and in a twist of fate he ended up joining forces with his old enemy, Margaret of Anjou. With the support of the French King, Warwick then staged a successful invasion in 1470 which saw Edward IV run off to Burgundy and the 'Readeption' of King Henry VI.

The return of the King

With the support of the Duke of Burgundy Edward staged a lightning comeback. Taking everyone by surprise, his army entered London and ended the second, and very brief reign of Henry VI. Edward then went on a little killing spree, first turning his attention to Warwick whose forces were defeated at Barnet where the Kingmaker fell. In the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471 Henry VI's son Edward, Prince of Wales was defeated and killed. Edward also had Henry VI killed for good measure. Edward was restored as King and reigned for a further 12 years without serious challenge, thanks largely to the fact that he'd killed all the main Lancastrian contenders to the throne.



The two princes



During Edward's second reign he had two sons, and even managed to invade France and Scotland. All was well in the House of York... that is until Edward died unexpectedly at the age of 41.

Upon King Edward's death his once loyal brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester claimed that Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville had been invalid, and Edward's sons and true heirs to the throne were therefore illegitimate. He had the two young princes, Edward V and Richard of Shrewsbury imprisoned in the Tower, and to everyone's dismay they were never seen again. No one knows who killed them, or if indeed they were killed, but it seems likely that treacherous uncle Richard had them 'removed' to prevent any future challenge to his rule as King Richard III.

The last of the Plantagenets

Richard's luck finally ran out only two years into his reign when a French-speaking Welshman called Henry Tudor invaded England with the support of the French King. Henry, a Lancastrian, gambled everything on one battle: the Battle of Bosworth Field and won, becoming the last English King to win his throne on the battlefield. Richard III fought bravely but was slain, becoming the last English King to die on the battlefield, and with him died the Plantagenet dynasty.



Henry Tudor was crowned King Henry VII, and though he didn't have a strong claim to the throne, he soon sorted that by marrying his cousin, a Yorkist. In doing so he united the Houses of Lancaster and York and a new royal family was created known as the Tudors – now that was a great television series. The rest, as they say, is history.