

## British History Series: Episode 17: Dawn of the Tudors

In this talk we explored the Tudors, one of England's most famous, yet surprisingly short-lived, royal houses. While names like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I often dominate discussions, we're starting with the dynasty's founder, Henry VII.

### Henry VII's Unlikely Path to the Throne

Henry VII's claim to the English throne was notably weak. His lineage stemmed from his mother, Margaret Beaufort, whose great-grandmother, Catherine Swinford, had children with John of Gaunt (son of Edward III) outside of marriage. Though later legitimized, Henry IV had intended to exclude these "Beaufort" children from the line of succession, creating a legal "grey area" Henry Tudor exploited. He truly seized the crown through his victory at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 against Richard III, much like William the Conqueror.

### Cementing Power and Early Challenges

Following his victory, Henry moved swiftly to consolidate his rule:

- **Coronation:** On October 30, 1485, just two months after Bosworth, he was crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey, securing crucial church legitimization.
- **Strategic Marriage:** In January 1486, he married Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV. This union symbolically merged the warring houses of Lancaster (represented by the red rose) and York (the white rose), creating the enduring Tudor Rose.

Despite these efforts, Henry's reign faced immediate threats, particularly from the Yorkist faction. Key rivals included:

- **Edward, Earl of Warwick:** Son of George, Duke of Clarence (Edward IV's brother), and at only 10 years old, he had a potentially stronger claim, despite his father's previous treason. Henry, wary, imprisoned him in the Tower of London.
- **The de la Pole Family:** The four sons of Elizabeth de la Pole, sister to Edward IV and Richard III, had a direct and unambiguous lineage back to Edward III, making their claim to the throne much stronger than Henry's. The eldest, John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, was even named heir presumptive by Richard III after

Richard's own son died.

## **The Pretenders: Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck**

### **Lambert Simnel (1487):**

A boy tutored by a priest named Richard Simon, Simnel was initially presented as Richard, one of the "Princes in the Tower." However, Simon soon changed his story, claiming Simnel was the imprisoned Edward, Earl of Warwick. In Dublin, where Yorkist support remained strong, Simnel was even crowned King Edward VI. He was joined by John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, who brought 2,000 Swiss mercenaries funded by Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy (sister of Edward IV and Richard III).

### **The Battle of Stokefield:**

On June 16, 1487, Henry VII, with a larger and more experienced army, decisively defeated Simnel's forces in Nottinghamshire. Over 4,000 rebels were killed, including John de la Pole. Many historians consider Stokefield, not Bosworth, as the true end of the Wars of the Roses.

### **Trivia:**

Henry VII showed surprising leniency towards Lambert Simnel, believing him a pawn. Simnel was put to work in the royal kitchens and later as a falconer, disappearing from historical records.

### **Perkin Warbeck (1490–1499):**

Claiming to be Prince Richard, the younger "Prince in the Tower," Warbeck also received support from Margaret of Burgundy, who seemed intent on destabilizing Henry's rule. After failed invasion attempts in Kent and Ireland, Warbeck landed in Cornwall in September 1497, raising an army of 6,000 Cornishmen. However, upon learning the royal army (led by the same Earl of Oxford who commanded at Stokefield) was approaching, Warbeck famously "did a runner," abandoning his army. Captured and publicly paraded through London, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London alongside the real Edward, Earl of Warwick. In 1499, both Warbeck and the Earl of Warwick were executed after an escape attempt.

## **The Lingering de la Pole Threat**

Even after these challenges, the de la Pole family remained a concern:

- **Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk:** The second de la Pole brother fled England in 1501 with his younger brother, Richard, actively seeking support in Europe as the rightful claimant. The Habsburg Emperor Maximilian even acknowledged his claim, but refused to provide military aid. In 1506, Edmund was fortuitously shipwrecked on the English coast and imprisoned in the Tower of London until his

execution under Henry VIII in 1513.

- **Richard de la Pole:** The youngest brother, Richard, raised an army of 12,000 in France in 1514, ready to invade England. However, a treaty between Henry VIII and the French King led to the dissolution of the invasion force. Richard died fighting in Italy in 1525, effectively ending the active de la Pole threat.
- **William de la Pole:** The remaining brother, William, wisely chose not to press his claim and spent his life imprisoned in the Tower of London from 1501 until his death in 1539.

### **A "Boring" But Crucial Reign**

Henry VII reigned for 24 years. Despite the continuous threats to his throne, his later years were remarkably stable, especially compared to the dramatic reigns of his son Henry VIII and granddaughter Elizabeth I. Henry was known as a frugal monarch who significantly improved England's finances by establishing a highly efficient tax collecting system. While not as flashy as his successors, Henry VII's shrewdness and resilience were paramount in securing the Tudor dynasty for generations to come.