

Henry II - Day 1

Henry II became king of England in 1154. He had to fight for the throne, but in the end he spent less than half his reign in England. Although he established peace in the country after years of civil war, he is often remembered fighting against his own sons until his death.

Early Life

Henry was born in 1133. He was the son of Geoffrey of Anjou (a region in France) and Matilda, who was the daughter of King Henry I of England. When Henry was two years old, Henry I died. Matilda thought that she should be queen of England. However, Stephen, the grandson of William I, had already claimed the throne. Matilda and her supporters battled Stephen for years. In 1148, she gave up and left England.

During this time, Henry received a good education, in France and in England. He became the duke of Normandy in 1150 and the count of Anjou in 1151 after his father died. His marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 also made him duke of Aquitaine. But he thought that he should be the king of England as well! In 1153, Henry invaded England. Stephen soon signed an agreement saying that Henry would become king after he died.

Henry's Reign

In 1154, Henry returned to England to take over the throne when Stephen died. He became the first in the line of English kings known as the Plantagenets. However, during the 34 years of his reign, he only spent 13 years in England. The rest of the time he spent living in France.

Henry brought back law and order to England after the troubled times of the civil wars. Henry and his chancellor, Thomas Becket, also reformed (changed and improved) the laws in the country.

For many years, Henry and Becket worked together to improve the country, but later the two men argued. After Becket was made Archbishop of Canterbury his views changed, and he started to disagree with the king. Becket was murdered in 1170.

Family Problems

Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine had eight children. Their three daughters married into other royal families throughout Europe. One son died as a child. The other four were Henry (the Younger), Geoffrey, Richard, and John. The four brothers did not get along with each other. They did not like the way their father had divided up his lands between them. They began to fight each other and their father. Eleanor sided with her sons rather than her husband.

Richard formed an alliance with King Philip of France and went to war with Henry. Henry was even more disappointed when he learned that John had joined his brother. Henry II was defeated by his sons and died on July 6, 1189, in Tours, France. He was succeeded by Richard.

King Richard and King John - Day 2

Henry II had eight children, including five sons who all wanted to become King. Henry the Younger was crowned as a junior King whilst Henry was still alive, but he died at age 28. John appeared to be Henry II's favourite son, but Richard would become King first.

Richard the Lionheart

Richard was a great military leader, commanding his first army aged 16. It is for this reason that he became known as Richard the Lionheart. However, as king Richard ordered that all Jews should be banned from receiving special rewards. When Jewish leaders arrived to give gifts to Richard, he stripped them of their clothes and flogged them. Jews were then persecuted in England, with many being forced to become Christians.

Richard spent very little time in England as King: probably only about six months during his total reign of ten years. Some historians think that he didn't see England as a home, just as a place to collect money and men for his armies. He started heavily taxing his people straight away, sold off important positions and taking money from the church. Richard was said to have declared "I would have sold London if I could find a buyer".

As well as being courageous, Richard was known to be cruel. He set out on a Crusade – a religious war to bring the Holy Land (modern day Israel and Palestine) under Christian control – against the great military leader Saladin.

Richard, with the help of King Philip II of France, took many important cities back from Saladin. In one particularly gory episode, Richard cruelly ordered 3,000 Muslim prisoners including men, women and children, to be murdered in full view of Saladin's army.

Meanwhile, Richard's brother John was ruling England and making a claim to be the King. When he returned to England, he reminded his people that he was their King. However, once again he soon left England to fight in Normandy and a crossbow in 1189 killed him while in France.

Bad King John

King John is widely viewed as one of the worst kings in history. King John was the youngest of Henry II's children and his favourite. Although Richard succeeded Henry after his death, John ruled over England for most of Richard's reign when on the crusades or in Normandy. His father was a fantastic administrator, and his brother was a fierce warrior: both key attributes of being a good medieval King. Yet, John was neither a good administrator nor a brave warrior.

He was said to be vain, jealous and vengeful. In 1194, whilst his brother was away fighting in his holy war, John plotted to seize (take) the throne for himself.

He spent huge sums of money on fine clothes and jewellery for himself. Just five years after becoming King, John lost most of England's territory in France.

Then, in 1209, he quarrelled with the Pope over who should be the Archbishop of Canterbury and was excommunicated (told to leave) from the church.

Probably John's worst failing, though, was how he dealt with the barons (major landowners) in England. He raised taxes without asking them first. John also took away much of their land to give to his son, Henry III. Taking property in this way not only made John unpopular but showed that he didn't have to follow the same laws as everyone else.

Henry V - Day 3

Henry V of England was the King of England from 1413 to 1422. He was born at Monmouth, Wales. It is not known whether he was born on 9 August 1386 or 16 September 1387. He is one of the most famous English kings and known for being a 'brave warrior' and, despite his short reign, succeeded in making England one of the strongest kingdoms in Europe. He was both proud and ambitious and had big ideas for his country.

Early Life

Henry V was the son of Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, and Mary de Bohun, who died before Bolingbroke became king. Even before he became king in 1413, Henry had fought his first battle at just age 14! In addition, Henry was an intelligent man. He was the first King of England to be able to read and write English easily. Many kings before him had all preferred to speak French rather than English.

Agincourt

His most famous victory was at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 where the English beat a much bigger and much stronger French army. The French had been one of major enemies of England for a long time. With an army of between 12,000 and 36,000 men, the French outnumbered the much smaller English army (6,000-9,000). However, the longbow was an important weapon for the English and its presence helped win the battle. Agincourt is still remembered as one of the most important battles in the history of England. Shakespeare wrote a play about the battle and made Henry important in other plays.

Warrior King

Henry's victories at Agincourt and Battle of Rouen (1419) forced the French King to make peace. After Agincourt, England continued to grow in strength and its power and influence were significant. From the days of French control over England, Henry V now had a powerful country that could attempt to conquer parts of Europe.

During his reign, Henry increased his power as King of England and also took the title of King of France. In 1420, Henry married Catherine, daughter of the King of France, and they had one son who they called Henry.

Death

Henry V was only 35 when he died from dysentery in France on 31 August 1422. His eight-month-old son, who became Henry VI, succeeded him. Even today, he is known and celebrated by historians as one of the great warrior kings of medieval England who helped start England on the journey to the country it is today.