

# Henry VI of England

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**Henry VI** (6 December 1421 – 21 May 1471) was King of England from 1422 to 1461 and again from 1470 to 1471, and disputed King of France from 1422 to 1453. The only child of Henry V, he succeeded to the English throne at the age of nine months upon his father's death, and succeeded to the French throne on the death of his grandfather Charles VI shortly afterwards. Henry inherited the long-running Hundred Years War (1337–1453), where Charles VII contested his claim to the French throne. Henry married Charles's niece, Margaret of Anjou, partially in the hope of achieving peace in 1445, but the policy failed, leading to the murder of William de la Pole, one of Henry's key advisors. The war recommenced, with France taking the upper hand; by 1453, Calais was Henry's only remaining territory on the continent.

Henry experienced a mental breakdown after the failure of the war, with Richard of York taking control of the government as regent until his recovery the following year. Civil war broke out in 1460, leading to a long period of dynastic conflict known as the Wars of the Roses. Henry was taken prisoner by Richard of York at Northampton on 10 July 1460 but was rescued that December by forces loyal to Margaret. He was deposed on 29 March 1461 following the victory at Towton by Richard's son, who took the throne as Edward IV. Henry suffered another breakdown and, despite Margaret continuing to lead a resistance to Edward, he was captured by Edward's forces in 1465 and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick, restored Henry to the throne in 1470, but Edward defeated Neville and retook power in 1471, imprisoning Henry in the Tower once again.

Henry died in the Tower during the night of 21 May 1471, possibly killed on the orders of Edward. He was buried at Chertsey Abbey, before being moved to Windsor Castle in 1484. Miracles were attributed to Henry after his death, and he was informally regarded as a saint and martyr until the 16th century. He left a legacy of educational institutions, having founded Eton College, King's College (Cambridge) and All Souls College, Oxford. William Shakespeare wrote a trilogy of plays about his life, depicting him as weak-willed and easily influenced by his wife, Margaret.

## Contents

- 1 Child king
- 2 Assumption of government and French policies

## Henry VI



### King of England (more...)

**1st reign** 31 August 1422 – 4 March 1461

**Coronation** 6 November 1429,  
Westminster Abbey

**Predecessor** Henry V

**Successor** Edward IV

**Regents** *See*

**2nd reign** 3 October 1470 – 11 April 1471

**Predecessor** Edward IV

**Successor** Edward IV

### King of France

**Reign** 21 October 1422 –  
19 October 1453

**Coronation** 16 December 1431,  
Notre Dame de Paris

**Predecessor** Charles VI


**Successor** Charles VII

**Born** 6 December 1421  
Windsor Castle, Berkshire

**Died** 21 May 1471 (aged 49)  
Tower of London, London

**Burial** Windsor Castle, Berkshire

- 3 Marriage to Margaret of Anjou
- 4 Ascendancy of Suffolk and Somerset
- 5 Insanity, and the ascendancy of York
- 6 Wars of the Roses
- 7 Return to the throne
- 8 Imprisonment and death
- 9 Legacy
  - 9.1 Architecture and education
  - 9.2 Posthumous cult
  - 9.3 Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and after
- 10 Arms
- 11 Ancestry
- 12 References
- 13 External links

<b>Consort</b>	Margaret of Anjou
<b>Issue</b>	Edward of Westminster, Prince of Wales
<b>House</b>	House of Lancaster
<b>Father</b>	Henry V of England
<b>Mother</b>	Catherine of Valois
<b>Religion</b>	Catholicism
<b>Signature</b>	

## Child king



Henry VI, aged nine months, is shown being placed in the care of the Earl of Warwick

Henry was the only child and heir of King Henry V. He was born on 6 December 1421 at Windsor Castle. He succeeded to the throne as King of England at the age of nine months upon his father's death on 31 August 1422; he was the youngest person ever to succeed to the English throne. A few weeks later on 21 October 1422 in accordance with the Treaty of Troyes of 1420, he became titular King of France upon his grandfather Charles VI's death. His mother, Catherine of Valois, was then 20 years old. As Charles VI's daughter, she was viewed with considerable suspicion by English nobles and was prevented from playing a full role in her son's upbringing.

On 28 September 1423, the nobles swore loyalty to Henry VI. They summoned Parliament in the King's name and established a regency council to govern until the King should come of age. One of Henry V's surviving brothers, John, Duke of Bedford, was appointed senior regent of the realm and was in charge of the ongoing war in France. During Bedford's absence, the government of England was headed by Henry V's other surviving brother, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, who was appointed Lord Protector and Defender of the Realm. His duties were limited to keeping the peace and summoning Parliament. Henry V's half-uncle Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester (after 1426 also Cardinal), had an important place

on the Council. After the Duke of Bedford died in 1435, the Duke of Gloucester claimed the Regency himself, but was contested in this by the other members of the Council.

From 1428, Henry's tutor was Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, whose father had been instrumental in the opposition to Richard II's reign.

Henry's half-brothers, Edmund and Jasper, the sons of his widowed mother and Owen Tudor, were later given earldoms. Edmund Tudor was the father of Henry Tudor, who later became Henry VII.

In reaction to Charles VII Valois' coronation as French King in Reims Cathedral on 17 July 1429,<sup>[1]</sup> Henry was soon crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey on 6 November 1429,<sup>[2]</sup> followed by his own coronation as King of France at Notre Dame de Paris on 26 December 1431.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> It was not until 13 November 1437, shortly before his 16th birthday, that he obtained some measure of independent authority,<sup>[6]</sup> but his growing willingness to

involve himself in administration became apparent in 1434 when the place named on writs temporarily changed from Westminster (where the Privy Council was) to Cirencester (where the king was).<sup>[7]</sup> He finally assumed full royal powers when he came of age.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Assumption of government and French policies

Henry was declared of age in 1437, at the age of sixteen in the year in which his mother died, and he assumed the reins of government. Henry, shy and pious, averse to deceit and bloodshed, immediately allowed his court to be dominated by a few noble favourites who clashed on the matter of the French war.

After the death of King Henry V, England had lost momentum in the Hundred Years' War, while, beginning with Joan of Arc's military victories, the Valois gained ground. The young king came to favour a policy of peace in France, and thus favoured the faction around Cardinal Beaufort and William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, who thought likewise, while Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and Richard, Duke of York, who argued for a continuation of the war, were ignored.



Mid-15th-century depiction of Henry being crowned King of France

## Marriage to Margaret of Anjou



Margaret of Anjou, depicted in the Talbot Shrewsbury Book, 1444-45

Cardinal Beaufort and the Earl of Suffolk persuaded the king that the best way of pursuing peace with France was through a marriage with Margaret of Anjou, the niece of King Charles VII. Henry agreed, especially when he heard reports of Margaret's stunning beauty, and sent Suffolk to negotiate with Charles, who agreed to the marriage on condition that he would not have to provide the customary dowry and instead would receive the lands of Maine and Anjou from the English. These conditions were agreed to in the Treaty of Tours, but the cession of Maine and Anjou was kept secret from parliament, as it was known that this would be hugely unpopular with the English populace. The marriage took place at Titchfield Abbey on 23 April 1445, one month after Margaret's 15th birthday. She had arrived with an established household, composed primarily, not of Angevins, but of members of Henry's royal servants; this increase in the size of the royal household, and a concomitant increase on the birth of their son, Edward of Westminster, in 1453 led to proportionately greater expense but also to greater patronage opportunities at Court.<sup>[9]</sup>

Henry had wavered in yielding Maine and Anjou to Charles, knowing that the move was unpopular and would be opposed by the Dukes of Gloucester and York. However, Margaret was determined to make him see it through. As the treaty became public knowledge in 1446, public anger focused on the Earl of Suffolk, but Henry and Margaret were determined to protect him.

## Ascendancy of Suffolk and Somerset

In 1447, the King and Queen summoned the Duke of Gloucester before parliament on the charge of treason. Queen Margaret had no tolerance for any sign of disloyalty towards her husband and kingdom, thus any inclination of it was immediately brought to her attention. This move was instigated by Gloucester's enemies, the Earl of Suffolk, whom Margaret held in great esteem, and the aging Cardinal Beaufort and his nephew, Edmund Beaufort, Earl of Somerset. Gloucester was put in custody in Bury St Edmunds, where he died, probably of a heart attack (although contemporary rumours spoke of poisoning) before he could be tried.



The Duke of York, now Henry's heir presumptive, was excluded from the court circle and sent to govern Ireland, while his opponents, the Earls of Suffolk and Somerset were promoted to Dukes, a title at that time still normally reserved for immediate relatives of the monarch.<sup>[10]</sup> The new Duke of Somerset was sent to France to lead the war.

In the later years of Henry's reign, the monarchy became increasingly unpopular, due to a breakdown in law and order, corruption, the distribution of royal land to the king's court favourites, the troubled state of the crown's finances, and the steady loss of territories in France. In 1447, this unpopularity took the form of a Commons campaign against the Duke of Suffolk, who was the most unpopular of all the King's entourage and widely seen as a traitor. He was impeached by Parliament to a background that has been called "the baying for Suffolk's blood [by] a London mob",<sup>[11]</sup> to the extent that Suffolk admitted his alarm to the king.<sup>[12]</sup> Ultimately, Henry was forced to send him into exile, but Suffolk's ship was intercepted in the English Channel. His murdered body was found on the beach at Dover.<sup>[13]</sup>

In 1449, the Duke of Somerset, leading the campaign in France, reopened hostilities in Normandy, but by the autumn had been pushed back to Caen. By 1450, the French had retaken the whole province, so hard won by Henry V. Returning troops, who had often not been paid, added to the lawlessness in the southern counties of England. Jack Cade led a rebellion in Kent in 1450, calling himself "John Mortimer", apparently in sympathy with York, and setting up residence at the White Hart Inn in Southwark (the white hart had been the symbol of the deposed Richard II).<sup>[14]</sup> Henry came to London with an army to crush the rebellion, but on finding that Cade had fled kept most of his troops behind while a small force followed the rebels and met them at Sevenoaks. The flight proved to have been tactical: Cade successfully ambushed the force in the Battle of Solefields and returned to occupy London. In the end, the rebellion achieved nothing, and London was retaken after a few days of disorder; but this was principally because of the efforts of its own residents rather than the army. At any rate the rebellion showed that feelings of discontent were running high.<sup>[15]</sup>

In 1451, the Duchy of Guyenne, held since Henry II's time, was also lost. In October 1452, an English advance in Guyenne retook Bordeaux and was having some success but by 1453, Bordeaux was lost again, leaving Calais as England's only remaining territory on the continent.

## Insanity, and the ascendancy of York

In 1452, the Duke of York was persuaded to return from Ireland, claim his rightful place on the council and put an end to bad government. His cause was a popular one and he soon raised an army at Shrewsbury. The court party, meanwhile, raised their own similar-sized force in London. A stand-off took place south of London, with York presenting a list of grievances and demands to the court circle, including the arrest of Edmund Beaufort, 2nd Duke of Somerset. The king initially agreed, but Margaret intervened to prevent the arrest of Beaufort. By 1453, his influence had been restored, and York was again isolated. The court party was also strengthened by the announcement that the Queen was pregnant.

However, on hearing of the final loss of Bordeaux in August 1453, Henry experienced a mental breakdown and became completely unresponsive to everything that was going on around him for more than a year. (Henry may have been suffering from a form of schizophrenia, according to



*Salut d'or*, depicting Henry as King of England and France, struck in Rouen



Depiction of Henry enthroned, from the Talbot Shrewsbury Book, 1444-45

modern experts, as he reportedly demonstrated other symptoms of schizophrenia, especially hallucinations.)<sup>[16]</sup> He even failed to respond to the birth of a son and heir, who was christened Edward. Henry may have inherited a congenital psychiatric condition from Charles VI of France, his maternal grandfather, who was affected by intermittent periods of insanity during the last thirty years of his life.<sup>[17]</sup>

The Duke of York, meanwhile, had gained a very important ally, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, one of the most influential magnates and possibly richer than York himself. York was named regent as Protector of the Realm in 1454. The queen was excluded completely, and Edmund Beaufort was detained in the Tower of London, while many of York's supporters spread rumours that Edward was not the king's son, but Beaufort's.<sup>[18]</sup> Other than that, York's months as regent were spent tackling the problem of government overspending.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Wars of the Roses

On Christmas Day 1454, King Henry regained his senses. Disaffected nobles who had grown in power during Henry's reign, most importantly the Earls of Warwick and Salisbury, took matters into their own hands. They backed the claims of the rival House of York, first to the Regency, and then to the throne itself, due to York's better descent from Edward III. It was agreed York would become Henry's successor, despite York being older.<sup>[19]</sup>

There followed a violent struggle between the houses of Lancaster and York. Henry was defeated and captured at the Battle of Northampton on 10 July 1460. The Duke of York was killed by Margaret's forces at the Battle of Wakefield on 31 December 1460, and Henry was rescued from imprisonment following the Second Battle of St Albans on 17 February 1461. By this point, however, Henry was suffering such a bout of madness that he was apparently laughing and singing while the battle raged. He was defeated at the Battle of Towton on 29 March 1461 by the son of the Duke of York, Edward of York, who then became King Edward IV. Edward failed to capture Henry and his queen, who fled to Scotland. During the first period of Edward IV's reign, Lancastrian resistance continued mainly under the leadership of Queen Margaret and the few nobles still loyal to her in the northern counties of England and Wales. Henry, who had been safely hidden by Lancastrian allies in Scotland, Northumberland and Yorkshire, was captured by King Edward in 1465 and subsequently held captive in the Tower of London.



Silver goad of Henry VI, York  
Museums Trust

While imprisoned, Henry did some writing, including the following poem:

Kingdoms are but cares  
    State is devoid of stay,  
Riches are ready snares,  
    And hasten to decay  
Pleasure is a privy prick  
    Which vice doth still provoke;  
Pomps, imprompt; and fame, a flame;  
    Power, a smoldering smoke.  
Who meanth to remove the rock  
    Owst of the slimy mud  
Shall mire himself, and hardly scape  
    The swelling of the flood".<sup>[20]</sup>

## Return to the throne

Queen Margaret, exiled in Scotland and later in France, was determined to win back the throne on behalf of her husband and son. By herself, there was little she could do. However, eventually Edward IV had a falling-out with two of his main supporters: Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, and his own younger brother George, Duke of Clarence. At the urging of King Louis XI of France they formed a secret alliance with Margaret. After marrying his daughter to Henry and Margaret's son, Edward of Westminster, Warwick returned to England, forced Edward IV into exile, and restored Henry VI to the throne on 30 October 1470; the term "readeption" is still sometimes used for this event. However, by this time, years in hiding followed by years in captivity had taken their toll on Henry. Warwick and Clarence effectively ruled in his name.<sup>[21]</sup>



Gold "Angel" coin of Henry's later reign, struck in either London or York, showing Archangel Michael slaying the Dragon (left) and Henry's shield being carried aboard a ship (right)

Henry's return to the throne lasted less than six months. Warwick soon overreached himself by declaring war on Burgundy, whose ruler responded by giving Edward IV the assistance he needed to win back his throne by force. Edward IV returned to England in early 1471, after which he was reconciled with Clarence and killed Warwick at the Battle of Barnet. The Yorkists won a final decisive victory at the Battle of Tewkesbury on 4 May 1471, where Henry's son Edward was killed.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Imprisonment and death

Henry was imprisoned in the Tower of London again and when the royal party arrived into London, Henry VI was reported dead. Official chronicles and documents state that the deposed king died on the night of 21 May 1471. In all likelihood, Henry's opponents had kept him alive up to this point rather than leave the Lancasters with a far more formidable leader in Henry's son Edward. However, once the last of the most prominent Lancastrian supporters were either killed or exiled, it became clear that Henry VI would be a burden to Edward IV's reign. The common fear was the possibility of another noble utilizing the mentally unstable king to further their own agenda.

According to the *Historie of the arrivall of Edward IV*, an official chronicle favorable to Edward IV, Henry died of melancholy on hearing news of the Battle of Tewkesbury and his son's death.<sup>[23]</sup> It is widely suspected, however, that Edward IV, who was re-crowned the morning following Henry's death, had in fact ordered his murder.<sup>[24]</sup>

Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III* explicitly states that Richard killed Henry, an opinion he might have derived from Commynes' Memoir.<sup>[25]</sup> Another contemporary source, *Wakefield's Chronicle*, gives the date of Henry's death as 23 May, on which date Richard is known to have been away from London.

King Henry VI was originally buried in Chertsey Abbey; then, in 1484, his body was moved to St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, by Richard III. When the body of the king was found several centuries later, diggers found it to be five foot and nine inches. Light hair had been found to be covered in blood, with damage to the skull, showing that the king had indeed died due to violence.<sup>[26]</sup>



Wakefield Tower, the site in the Tower of London where Henry VI died



# Legacy

## Architecture and education

Henry's one lasting achievement was his fostering of education: he founded Eton College, King's College, Cambridge and All Souls College, Oxford. He continued a career of architectural patronage started by his father: King's College Chapel and Eton College Chapel and most of his other architectural commissions (such as his completion of his father's foundation of Syon Abbey) consisted of a late Gothic or Perpendicular-style church with a monastic and/or educational foundation attached. Each year on the anniversary of Henry VI's death, the Provosts of Eton and King's lay white lilies and roses, the respective floral emblems of those colleges, on the spot in the Wakefield Tower at the Tower of London where the imprisoned Henry VI was, according to tradition, murdered as he knelt at prayer. There is a similar ceremony at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle.<sup>[27]</sup>



King's College Chapel, Cambridge

## Posthumous cult

Miracles were attributed to the king, and he was informally regarded as a saint and martyr, addressed particularly in cases of adversity. The anti-Yorkist cult was encouraged by Henry Tudor, as dynastic propaganda. A volume was compiled of the miracles attributed to him at St George's Chapel, Windsor, where Richard III had reinterred him, and Henry VII began building a chapel at Westminster Abbey to house Henry VI's relics.<sup>[28]</sup> A number of Henry VI's miracles possessed a political dimension, such as his cure of a young girl afflicted with the *King's evil*, whose parents refused to bring her to the usurper, Richard III.<sup>[29]</sup> By the time of Henry VIII's break with Rome, canonisation proceedings were under way.<sup>[30]</sup> Hymns to him still exist, and until the Reformation his hat was kept by his tomb at Windsor, where pilgrims would put it on to enlist Henry's aid against migraines.<sup>[31]</sup>

Numerous miracles were credited to the dead king, including his raising the plague victim Alice Newnett from the dead and appearing to her as she was being stitched in her shroud.<sup>[32]</sup> He also intervened in the attempted hanging of a man who had been unjustly condemned to death, accused of stealing some sheep. Henry placed his hand between the rope and the man's windpipe, thus keeping him alive, after which he revived in the cart as it was taking him away for burial.<sup>[33]</sup> He was also capable of inflicting harm, such as when he struck John Robyns blind after Robyns cursed "Saint Henry". Robyns was healed only after he went on a pilgrimage to the shrine of King Henry.<sup>[34]</sup> A particular devotional act that was closely associated with the cult of Henry VI was the bending of a silver coin as an offering to the "saint" in order that he might perform a miracle. One story had a woman, Katherine Bailey, who was blind in one eye. As she was kneeling at mass, a stranger told her to bend a coin to King Henry. She promised to do so, and as the priest was raising the communion host, her partial blindness was cured.<sup>[35]</sup>

Although his shrine was enormously popular as a pilgrimage destination during the early decades of the 16th century,<sup>[36]</sup> over time, with the lessened need to legitimise Tudor rule, the cult of Henry VI faded.<sup>[37]</sup>

## Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and after

In 1590 William Shakespeare wrote a trilogy of plays about the life of Henry VI: *Henry VI, Part 1*, *Henry VI, Part 2*, and *Henry VI, Part 3*. His dead body and his ghost also appear in *Richard III*.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry is notable in that it does not mention the King's madness. This is considered to have been a politically-advisable move so as to not risk offending Elizabeth I whose family was descended from Henry's Lancastrian family. Instead Henry is portrayed as a pious and peaceful man ill-suited to the crown. He spends most of his time in contemplation of the Bible and expressing his wish to be anyone other than a king. Shakespeare's Henry is weak-willed and easily influenced allowing his policies to be led by Margaret and her allies, and being unable to defend himself against York's claim to the throne. He only takes an act of his own volition just before his death when he curses Richard of Gloucester just before he is murdered.



First page of *The first Part of Henry the Sixt* from the *First Folio* (1623)

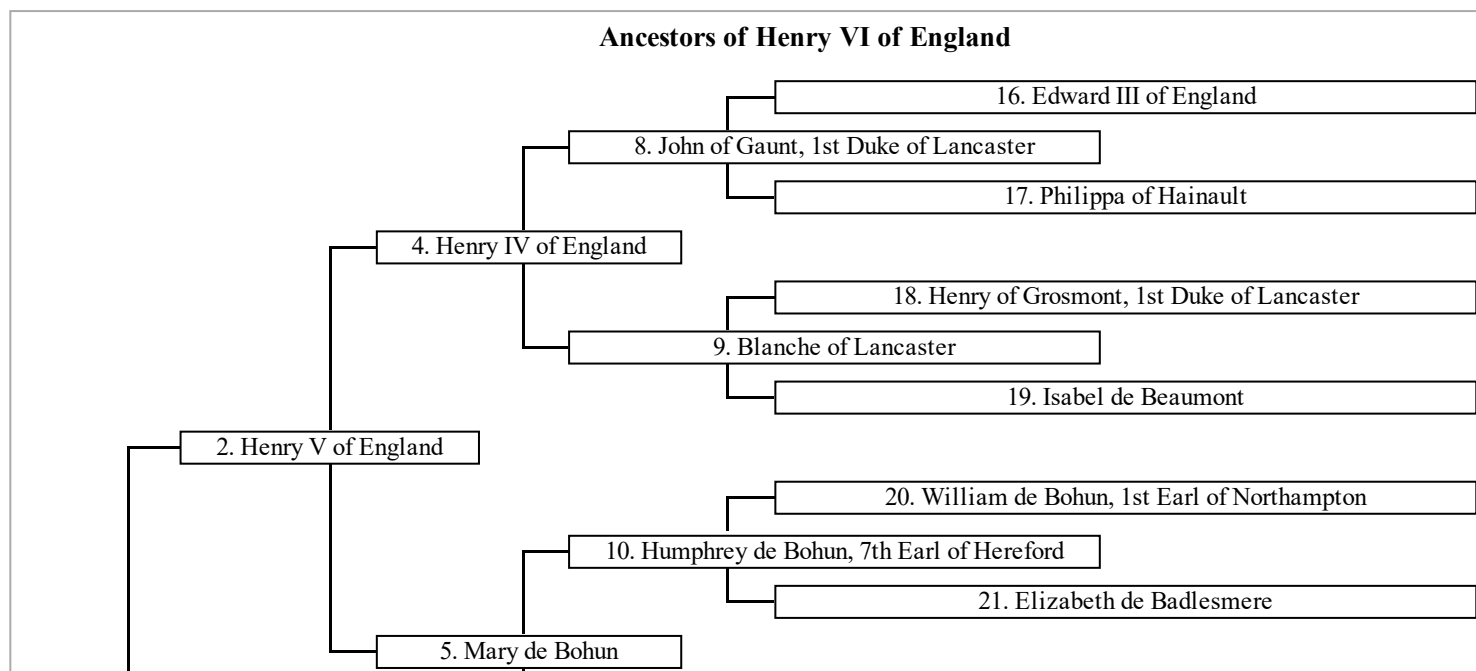
In screen adaptations of these plays he has been portrayed by: James Berry in the 1911 silent short *Richard III*; Terry Scully in the 1960 BBC series *An Age of Kings* which contained all the history plays from *Richard II* to *Richard III*; Carl Wery in the 1964 West German TV version *König Richard III*; David Warner in *Wars of the Roses*, a 1965 filmed version of the Royal Shakespeare Company performing the three parts of *Henry VI* (condensed and edited into two plays, *Henry VI* and *Edward IV*) and *Richard III*; Peter Benson in the 1983 BBC version of all three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*; Paul Brennen in the 1989 film version of the full cycle of consecutive history plays performed, for several years, by the English Shakespeare Company; Edward Jewesbury in the 1995 film version of *Richard III* with Ian McKellen as Richard; James Dalesandro as Henry in the 2008 modern-day film version of *Richard III*; and Tom Sturridge as Henry to Benedict Cumberbatch's Richard III in the 2016 second BBC series *The Hollow Crown*, an adaptation of *Henry VI* (condensed into two parts) and *Richard III*.

Miles Mander portrayed him in *Tower of London*, a 1939 horror film loosely dramatising the rise to power of Richard III.

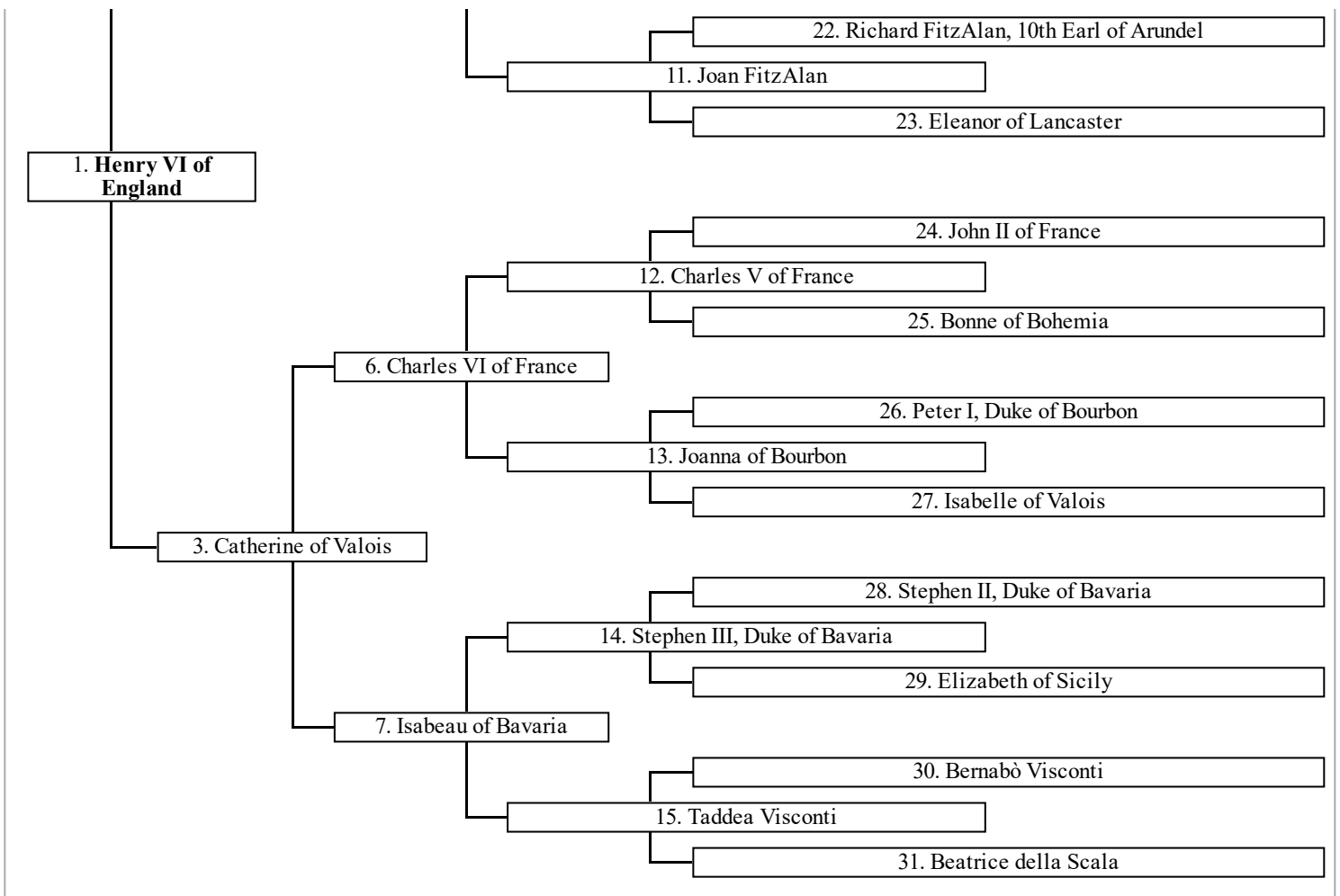
## Arms

As Duke of Cornwall, Henry's arms were those of the kingdom, differenced by a label argent of three points.<sup>[38]</sup>

## Ancestry







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- Charles VI, in turn, may have inherited a condition from his mother, Joanna of Bourbon, who also showed signs of mental illness, and/or other members of her family, who showed signs of psychiatric instability, such as Joanna's father, Peter I, Duke of Bourbon and her grandfather, Louis I, Duke of Bourbon. Joanna's brother Louis II, Duke of Bourbon is also reported to have exhibited symptoms of such a condition.
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21. Wolffe, Bertram (1981). *Henry VI*. London: Eyre Methuen. pp. 342–344.
22. The manner of the prince's death is one of historical speculation. See: Desmond Seward. "The Wars of the Roses", and Charles Ross, "Wars of the Roses". Both retell the traditional story that the prince sought sanctuary in Tewkesbury Abbey and was dragged out and butchered in the street.
23. John W. McKenna (1965), "Henry VI of England and the Dual Monarchy: aspects of royal political propaganda, 1422–1432", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* **28**:145–62.
24. Either, that with Prince Edward's death, there was no longer any reason to keep Henry alive, or that, *until* Prince Edward died, there was little benefit to killing Henry. According to rumours at the time and what spread through the ages, was that Henry VI, was killed with a blow to the back of the head, whilst at prayer in the late hours of the 21st of May 1471. Wolffe, Bertram (1981). *Henry VI*. London: Eyre Methuen. p. 347.
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35. Duffy, pg. 184
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## External links



Wikimedia Commons has media related to ***Henry VI of England***.

<p style="text-align:center">Henry VI of England  <b>House of Lancaster</b>            Cadet branch of the <b>House of Plantagenet</b>  <b>Born:</b> 6 December 1421      <b>Died:</b> 21 May 1471</p>		
<b>Regnal titles</b>		
Preceded by <b>Henry V</b>	<b>Duke of Aquitaine</b> 1422–1453	<b>Annexed by France</b>
	<b>King of England</b> <b>Lord of Ireland</b> 1422–1461	Succeeded by <b>Edward IV</b>
Preceded by <b>Edward IV</b>	<b>King of England</b> <b>Lord of Ireland</b> 1470–1471	
Preceded by <b>Charles VI</b>	— <b>DISPUTED</b> — <i><b>King of France</b></i> 1422 – 1453 Disputed by Charles VII Reason for dispute: Treaty of Troyes	Succeeded by <b>Charles VII</b> <i>(English claim continues to 1801)</i>
<b>Peerage of England</b>		
<b>Vacant</b> Title last held by <b>Henry of Monmouth</b>	<b>Duke of Cornwall</b> 1421–1422	<b>Vacant</b> Title next held by <b>Edward of Westminster</b>

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