Britpolitics Fact Sheet – The Wars of the Roses

# What were the Wars of the Roses?

The Wars of the Roses was a battle for the control of the throne of England. It was fought between two competing lines of the Royal House of Plantagenet, the House of Lancaster and the House of York. These were both powerful families and each laid claim to the throne of England as descendants of Edward III.

The House of Lancaster traced its Royal line back to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the third surviving son of Edward III.

The House of York were descendants of the second surviving son of Edward III, Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of Clarence. They made their claim to the throne through his daughter Philippa.

# Why was it called the Wars of the ‘Roses’?

The War takes its name from the roses used as badges of support. A red rose was used as a sign of allegiance to the House of Lancaster, a white rose for the House of York. It wasn’t called the Wars of the Roses at the time.

# Background to the Wars of the Roses

Edward the Black Prince was the eldest son of Edward III and Philippa of Hainault. The Black Prince died before his father Edward III. Richard son of the Black Prince and grandson of Edward III was made heir to the throne. In 1377 Richard was crowned Richard II.

In 1399 Henry Bolingbroke overthrew his cousin Richard II and claimed the throne of England as Henry IV. Henry IV was the first Lancastrian King. His father was John of Gaunt, son of Edward III.

On the death of Henry IV in 1413, his son was crowned King Henry V. Henry V ruled until his death from dysentery in 1422.

# Key People

## King Edward IV

Edward was born in April 1442. He was the son of Cecily Neville and Richard, Duke of York. When his father was killed at the Battle of Wakefield in 1460, Edward took up the Yorkist claim to the throne. He defeated the Lancastrian forces of Jasper Tudor, Earl of Pembroke in the Battle of Mortimer’s Cross in 1461.

With the backing of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick (the Kingmaker), Edward went on to win at the Battle of Towton. He was crowned King of England in 1461. In 1464 Edward secretly married the widow Elizabeth Woodville, with whom he was to have two surviving sons, Edward and Richard. A daughter, Elizabeth, went on to marry Henry VII.

His relationship with the Earl of Warwick began to break down as Edward asserted his own independence. The Earl of Warwick disagreed with Edward’s marriage to Elizabeth Woodville and the influential roles her family were given at court.

In 1469 The Earl of Warwick in an alliance with Edward's brother George, Duke of Clarence, led an armed rebellion against Edward. When the uprising failed they were forced to flee to France. Here they made an alliance with Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI. In 1470 they landed in England with a Lancastrian army. Edward IV and his brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester were forced to flee abroad. Elizabeth Woodville and her children went into sanctuary in Westminster Abbey.

In 1471 Edward and Richard returned to England. The Earl of Warwick was killed at the Battle of Barnet. With Lancastrian defeat at the Battle of Tewkesbury, Edward IV reclaimed his throne.

This period of Edward’s reign introduced stability to England. He removed Lancastrian supporters from positions of authority. He took an active role in government. Edward also brought greater control over the Crown’s finances. He reduced the Crown’s debt and used income from the Crown Estates to finance the running of the country. Trade and commerce were encouraged. In 1475 Edward invaded France. King Louis XI offered generous sums of money and a trade agreement to secure peace. This was set out in the Treaty of Picquigny.

In April 1483 Edward IV died of natural causes, leaving his twelve-year-old son Edward as his heir.

## King Henry VI

Henry VI succeeded to the throne of England after the death of his father Henry V in 1422. He was still only a baby, so a Council of Regency ran the country until he came of age.

Henry VI was not very effective as a King. He faced unrest at home and was losing his lands in France to the Dauphin, aided by Joan of Arc. He relied upon advisors who were not very popular.

In 1453 Henry was taken ill, probably suffering a mental breakdown. A Council of Regency was set up to run the country led by Richard, Duke of York. Richard was one of the most powerful men in the country. He had a claim to the throne through his mother Anne Mortimer who was a descendant of Lionel, Duke of Clarence. His grandfather was Edmund, Duke of York another son of Edward III.

In 1455, Henry VI had recovered and he took charge of the throne again. Richard, Duke of York felt his position insecure after the restoring to court of the Duke of Somerset. While Richard was acting as Protector of the Realm, the Duke of Somerset had been sent to the Tower. Richard raised an army and marched towards London. The Lancastrians and the Yorkists were now engaged in the civil war that would come to be known as the Wars of the Roses.

## King Richard III

Richard was born in 1452 at Fotheringhay Castle, Northamptonshire. He was the son of Cecily Neville and Richard, Duke of York. He was also the younger brother of Edward IV. After his brother was made King, Richard was made Duke of Gloucester. He was placed in the care of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick and spent a lot of time in the north of England. Edward IV made him Constable of England. Richard was given more responsibilities in the north of the country after he helped Edward reclaim the throne back from Henry VI.

Richard had always shown loyalty to his brother Edward.

Richard married Anne Neville, daughter of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick. They are known to have had one son Edward of Middleham.

After the death of Edward IV, Richard was appointed Protector of the Realm, as Edward V was only twelve.

Titulus Regius, (Passed as an Act of Parliament in 1484) set out the reasons why Richard was the rightful King. The document declared the marriage between Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville to be invalid and their children illegitimate. George, Duke of Clarence had been convicted and attainted of High Treason. He himself had already been executed, but the charges meant that any of his descendants were also disbarred from the throne. This left Richard, Duke of Gloucester the only son and heir of the late Richard, Duke of York. It made him the only legitimate heir to the throne of England.

Richard was crowned King Richard III in July 1483. Anne Neville was crowned Queen.

After the coronation, King Richard III and Queen Anne went on a Royal progress around the country. In August they were in York. Their son Edward was invested in York Minster as the Prince of Wales.

In October 1483 Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham and other powerful gentry rose up in rebellion. Richard put down the rebellion. The Duke of Buckingham was executed.

Most of the support for Richard III was in the north of England. He caused resentment amongst the gentry in the south of the country by elevating northerners to positions of authority.

In April 1484 Edward of Middleham, Prince of Wales died of illness. This left King Richard without a legitimate heir to the throne.

In 1484 King Richard set up the Council of the North to help govern the north of England.

In March 1485 Anne Neville died. She was buried in Westminster Abbey.

On 22 August Richard III was killed at the Battle of Bosworth Field. In 2013 it was confirmed that remains discovered buried under a car park in Leicester were those of Richard III.

## The Princes in the Tower

The two sons of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville were known as the Princes in the Tower. They were Edward V and his younger brother Prince Richard. Richard III, while still their Protector had placed them in the Tower of London for their own protection. At this time the Tower of London was a Royal Palace as well as a prison. They were to stay there until the coronation of Edward V, which was set for 22 June 1483. The coronation was cancelled.

The marriage between Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville had been declared invalid. It was claimed that Edward IV had already been betrothed to Lady Eleanor Butler (sometimes known as Lady Eleanor Talbot). Edward could therefore not be legally married to Elizabeth Woodville. This made their children illegitimate. Edward V and his brother Prince Richard could not claim the throne.

After the coronation of Richard III, the Princes in the Tower disappeared. Some rumours at the time suggested they had been murdered although no proof of this exists. Richard III is often implicated in their disappearance. Other individuals, including Henry Tudor and Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, have also been proposed as having a role in the disappearance of the Princes.

During the reign of Henry VII (Henry Tudor) pretenders to the throne such as Perkin Warbeck appeared, claiming to be Prince Richard.

In 1674 skeletons, allegedly of the two Princes, were discovered in the Tower of London. They are now in an urn in Westminster Abbey.

# Timeline of Events

1455

* Battle of St Albans. The first battle in the Wars of the Roses ends in defeat for the House of Lancaster. The Duke of Somerset is killed.

1455-1459

* This was a period of disorder across the country. There were numerous outbreaks of fighting between the Lancastrian and Yorkist supporters. Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick (the Kingmaker) supported the Yorkist cause and fought as an ally of Richard, Duke of York. The Earl of Warwick was one of the most powerful and influential men in the country.

1460

* Battle of Northampton. This ends in defeat for the Lancastrians. Henry VI is captured.
* The Act of Accord is passed which names Richard, Duke of York as heir to the throne upon the death of Henry VI. Prince Edward, Henry’s son is disinherited. Queen Margaret of Anjou fights for her son’s right to the Crown and assembles an army in the north.
* Battle of Wakefield. This was an important Lancastrian victory. Richard, Duke of York is killed in battle along with his son Edmund. His eldest son Edward, Earl of March lays claim to the throne of England for the House of York.

1461

* Battle of Mortimer’s Cross. This was a victory for the Yorkist army of Edward, Duke of York (Earl of March) over the Lancastrian army of Jasper Tudor, Earl of Pembroke. Jasper Tudor is the half-brother of Henry VI.
* Edward, Duke of York, is declared King Edward IV of England.
* Battle of Towton. Henry VI, Margaret of Anjou and their son are forced to flee after a decisive victory by the Yorkist forces of Edward IV and the Earl of Warwick. It was the biggest battle of the war to date. 28,000 of the 120,000 men who fought were killed.
* Edward is crowned King Edward IV.

1464

* Edward IV secret marriage to Elizabeth Woodville is made public. She is the widow of the Lancastrian Sir John Grey and seen as a commoner. Edward appoints members of the Woodville family to positions of authority.

1465

* Henry VI is captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London.

1469

* The Earl of Warwick turns against Edward IV.
* George, Duke of Clarence marries the Earl of Warwick’s eldest daughter Isabel.

1470

* The Earl of Warwick and George, Duke of Clarence (younger brother to Edward IV) are forced to flee to France when their rebellion fails. They form an alliance with Margaret of Anjou and plan to invade England.
* The Earl of Warwick’s youngest daughter, Anne Neville, is married to Edward, Prince of Wales.
* Henry VI is restored to the throne of England (Readeption) with the help of the Earl of Warwick. Edward IV flees to the continent with his brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester.

1471

* Battle of Barnet. Edward IV and his Yorkist forces land in England and defeat the Lancastrians. The Earl of Warwick is killed.
* Battle of Tewksbury. Edward IV regains the throne of England after the defeat of the Lancastrian forces. Edward, Prince of Wales, son and heir of Henry VI was killed in the battle.
* Margaret of Anjou and Anne Neville are taken prisoner.
* Henry VI dies in the Tower of London, probably murdered.

1478

* George, Duke of Clarence is executed. His is alleged to have been drowned in a barrel of Malmsey wine.

1483

* Edward IV dies. His twelve-year-old son becomes Edward V.
* Edward V is placed in the Tower of London for his own protection.
* Richard, Duke of Gloucester is appointed the Protector of Edward V.
* Richard the younger brother of Edward V is placed in the Tower of London for safety.
* The coronation of Edward V, set for the 22nd June, is cancelled.
* The ‘Princes in the Tower’ are declared illegitimate on the grounds that the marriage between Elizabeth Woodville and Edward IV was invalid.
* Richard, Duke of Gloucester claims the throne and is crowned as Richard III.
* The Princes in the Tower disappear.
* A rebellion by Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham ends in failure. He is executed.

1484

* The only known son of Richard III and Anne Neville, Edward of Middleham, dies.

1485

* On 7 August, the forces of Henry Tudor land in Wales. Henry Tudor laid claim to the throne through his mother Margaret Beaufort. Margaret was a descendant of John of Gaunt and supported the House of Lancaster.
* 22 August, Battle of Bosworth Field. Richard III is defeated and killed in battle. This is the end of the Plantagenet dynasty.
* Henry Tudor claims the throne as Henry VII.

1486

* Henry VII marries Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville. The red rose of Lancaster and the white rose of York are combined to form the Tudor rose.

1487

* The Battle of Stoke Field. It is considered to be the last battle in the Wars of the Roses. Henry VII defeats the Yorkist supporters of Lambert Simnel (a pretender to the throne) and John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln (named as heir to Richard III).