

The 15th Century: Transition from the Middle Ages to Renaissance

The 15th century was a period of transition, thus of contrasts, especially between that development which went on and the confusion in the feudal system. The great events taking place on the front scene of history were of course not without influence on what everyday life was subjected to. Crises led to unrests, lootings, and devastation. But the social order and stability of the country were not deeply affected. Indeed, the evolution depicted above encouraged **the prosperity of a mercantile and banking oligarchy.**

During that period, **great trading companies developed:** the *Merchant Tailors* and the *London Mercers*, for example. One the primary goal of that new bourgeoisie was the **expansion of education** among its ranks. It thus founded schools (the Merchant Tailors' is one of the finest) and created scholarships to send its sons to universities. **The diffusion of knowledge led to progressive learning of those who were to become the senior civil servant of the kingdom;** they were to constitute the most competent people to ensure an administrative reorganization for the future of the country. That task was to be assigned to them by the Tudors. Moreover, education achieved the cultural fusion necessary to the formation of a national spirit. William Caxton represented one of the products of that new educated oligarchy. He had spent thirty years in Netherland serving the *London Mercers*. Back to England in 1477, he brought with him the movable type printing which had been invented by Gutenberg.

During the 15th century, English ceased to be regarded as a "vulgar" language. It conquered a place and a status to become a "common language" beside French, the "noble" language. Latin remained during that period the international language used by scholars.

During that century, the crisis within the feudality led to the establishment of the House of Tudors with a monarchy more centralized and administrative: England shifted from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It was the period portrayed in the historical plays of Shakespeare: the abdication of Richard II in 1399 to the death of Henry VII, the first Tudor king. It was also the period of the **Wars of the Roses**, a series of dynastic civil wars in England fought by the rival houses of **Lancaster** and **York** between 1455 and 1485.

As previously said, the 15th century witnessed the **decline of the traditional form of feudalism.** With the development of a free peasantry, exchanges and commercial enterprise, the rural community ruled by strict feudal practices no more corresponded to reality on the ground and in expansion. The feudal system started to represent a constraint. **The natural aristocracy turned out to be an exploiting oligarchy.** In addition, the need to a more centralized and more complex administration became evident. **The barons struggled against that stream which threatened their privileges and tended to benefit the monarch.** Richard II, for instance, was forced to abdicate by a rebellion of nobles; but the kings of the House of Lancaster who succeeded him owed their power to their partisans not to an actually based legitimacy. That opened the door to quarrels for powers between the two rival Houses. England found political stability only under the reign of Henry VII Tudor: an unchallenged king dominating a weakened aristocracy who had the ability to carry out the reforms so required.

Throughout that context, it is noteworthy to mention **Sir John Fortescue**, who was the first English constitutional theoretician. He served as chief justice (at the top of the judicial system) for the House of Lancaster. He did not belong to feudal nobility but to the new class of civil servants: educated and competent. His main goal was the good management of the kingdom. That task required of course a strict and enlightened political authority, i.e. a good constitution. His first treaty on the domain, **In Praise of the Laws of England**, (1470) was probably written to contribute to the

education of Edward, son of King Henry VI. However, Prince Edward was killed at the Battle of Tewkesbury and that led to the fall of the house of Lancaster. Soon, Fortescue offered his talents to the House of York. His second work, The Governance of England, (written between 1471 and 1476) passes judgment on the errors, abuses, corruption that led to fall of the previous dynasty. According to him, the royal power should be “political.” By this, he meant that the power of the king should be limited by laws so that it does not become a harmful tyranny. To him, the most contentious problem is taxation which should be controlled by the parliament and the burden of which should be equally shared by the entire population. Another point raised by Fortescue is a possible solution to the evils resulting from a degenerating feudality. At the apogee of the system, the king is supported by the leaders of the nobility who form the Council and who are his immediate vassals. But when the system collapses, the court becomes the battlefield of fighting aristocratic factions which clash to preserve their respective interests. Fortescue suggests reforming the council, to appoint men not selected according to their rank or origin but according to their value and merit. Those civil servants would be appointed by and responsible before the monarch.

That model of government would be established under the Tudors: concentration of powers in the hands of the king, with the civil servants managing the kingdom's matters.

The Wars of the Roses

The Wars of the Roses were a series of dynastic civil wars in England fought by the rival houses of Lancaster and York between 1455 and 1485. The struggle was so named because the badge of the house of Lancaster was a red rose and that of the house of York a white rose.

The initial opponents were the Lancastrian king of England Henry VI, aided by his queen, Margaret of Anjou, and Richard Plantagenet, 3rd duke of York. Because of the insanity of the king and military losses in France during the last phase of the Hundred Years' War, the authority of the house of Lancaster was badly shaken. York asserted his claim to the throne in 1460, after having defeated the Lancastrian armies at St. Albans in 1455 and at Northampton in 1460. In the latter year York was defeated and killed at Wakefield. In 1461, however, his son was proclaimed king as Edward IV and shortly thereafter he decisively defeated Henry and Margaret, who then fled from England. In 1465 Henry was captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London.

The war was revived because of division within the Yorkist faction. Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, aided by George Plantagenet, duke of Clarence, younger brother of Edward, made an alliance with Margaret and led an invasion from France in 1470. Edward was driven into exile and Henry restored to the throne. In 1471, however, Edward returned and, aided by Clarence, defeated and killed Warwick at the Battle of Barnet. Shortly thereafter, the Lancastrians were totally defeated at the Battle of Tewkesbury, and Henry was murdered in the Tower.

After the death of Edward in 1483, his brother Richard usurped the throne, becoming king as Richard III, and the Lancastrians turned for leadership to Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, who later became King Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty. **In 1485 the forces of Richard and Henry fought the decisive Battle of Bosworth Field**, the last major encounter of the war. After Richard's death in battle, Henry ascended the throne and married Edward's daughter, thus uniting the houses. The chief result of the war was an increase in the power of the Crown. Battle and execution all but destroyed the old nobility, and the financial resources of the monarchy were strengthened by the confiscation of estates. Henry VII, often called Henry Tudor (1457-1509), became king of England (1485-1509).