

What's so gripping about the Tudors?

The dynasty was short-lived, insecure and suspicious, yet laid the foundations for our Navy, Church and Empire



A scene from Wolf Hall Photo: BBC

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You can get a real insight into a national psyche by considering the sort of stories that a nation chooses to tell about itself and its history. In Britain, many of the tales on our lips are about that great English dynasty of the 16th century: the Tudors. The recent stage, screen and literary success of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* is the merest tip of the iceberg, under which lie accumulated films (Shakespeare in Love; Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth*, *Anne of the Thousand Days*, to name but a few), plays (Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*), TV series (*The Tudors*) and a cottage industry of popular history books and novels, perhaps most famously, Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*.

At first glance, this is curious. Why, of all our many kings and queens, should the Tudors grip us in this way? The Tudor dynasty came from obscure origins to flourish for three generations and a mere 118 years, compared with the grand 331 years of the Plantagenets. Yet, how brightly they burned. The five (or six, if you count Lady Jane Grey) Tudor monarchs constituted the most important and significant dynasty in English history, fundamental not only to the story of our national identity, but also to the shaping of modern Britain.

So much that has been crucial to subsequent centuries of nationhood was forged on their watch. Their most obvious legacy is the Church of England, and the role of the monarch as its Supreme Head (later Governor). The creation of a national Church, distinct and separate from the Church of Rome, was premised on the idea of the sovereignty of the realm. In the terminology of the time, this meant claiming, as the preface to the 1533 Act of Appeals did, that “this realm of England is an empire”, with a monarch whose imperial status entitled him to be addressed for the first time, from 1534, as “His Majesty”. As such, the Church of England was an essential part of the claim that England was a country with its own standing and clout, splendidly isolated from Catholic Europe.

Following the Elizabethan settlement, subsequent definitions of Englishness revolved around the association between national identity and Protestantism, laying the ground for the 17th century’s civil war, the Glorious Revolution and the statute of 1701, designed to ensure that no Catholic could ever again become sovereign. The Queen remains the Supreme Governor of the Church of England to this day, and even the change to the law in 2011 only allowed a monarch to marry a Catholic, not to become one.

The Tudor era also oversaw the creation of the modern state, complete with bureaucracy and administration. The institution in 1538 of compulsory registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths in every parish was the beginning of the sort of data collection on which the ordering of modern civil society depends. At the highest level of government, the emergence of the role of the principal secretary – Cardinal Thomas Wolsey; Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex; and later, William Cecil, Lord Burghley – acting as chief executive minister of the Crown in matters domestic and foreign, was pivotal.

The secretary’s private staff of clerks gradually emerged into a permanent office organisation – the future departments of the secretaries of state – while the formal establishment of the Privy Council as a department of government under Henry VIII, with or without a leading man, had even more immediate consequences for the smooth running of the country.

We also see under Elizabeth (and even, arguably, as early as Henry VII’s reign) the beginnings of the secret service. Even if Sir Francis Walsingham’s agents did not constitute a bureaucratic structure that would seamlessly metamorphose into MI5 and MI6, Walsingham’s “intelligencers” formed a powerful web of relationships and patronage that brought him information essential to the protection of the Crown and state – as Mary, Queen of Scots, learnt to her cost. My favourite Tudor fact is that one of these intelligencers, the astronomer, astrologer, mathematician, alchemist and cartographer Dr John Dee, signed off his letters to Elizabeth with two zeros and a backwards long division sign – making him the first 007.

Parliament, too, was transformed in this century. As a result of the long sessions, far-reaching measures, and revolutionary consequences of the Reformation Parliament (1529–1536), Parliament went from being an occasional king’s court – called for advice on great matters and for the provision of

funds – to being a permanent place of political importance, a representative institution whose statutes bound everyone. Parliament “is the most high and absolute power in the realm”, Sir Thomas Smith stated in 1565, whose decisions “bindeth all manner of persons”. By 1640, devotion to its use and the sense that it was an intrinsic part of English government were so great that 11 years of Charles I’s “personal rule” were sufficient grounds for civil war.

Not only did Church and state transmute under the Tudors, but also the very idea of Britain and its place in the world was recast. Henry VIII did not just claim to be King of Ireland; his reign also saw the formal annexation of Wales in 1536 and 1543. In his negotiations with, and challenges to, his rivals, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and King Francis I of France, Henry VIII also laid claim to a far greater role for England than this puny little country on the edge of Europe had ever previously pretended. The Field of Cloth of Gold – a party without parallel for three weeks in a field in northern France, designed to demonstrate capacity for war while professing peace – was England’s coming-out ball that signalled that it was a distinct and powerful country in its own right.

Empire was financed and pursued by the Tudors. It began with Henry VII funding Giovanni Caboti, or Sir John Cabot, an Italian with an English fleet, to sail west in 1497, where he discovered Newfoundland. Admittedly, for decades thereafter, the English dropped the empire baton; while the Spanish swarmed over central and southern America in the 1520s and 1530s, it wasn’t until well into the reign of Elizabeth that men like Sir John Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake, and Sir Humphrey Gilbert took up the English cause once more. Drake completed the first circumnavigation of the globe by a single man (Magellan never made it home) and claimed what were arguably England’s first overseas possessions – Elizabeth Island and Nova Albion in California.

Tudor travellers also headed north-west – Martin Frobisher went in search of the North-West Passage – and south-east: the nine years that Ralph Fitch spent in India made him a valuable consultant for the 218 merchants to whom Elizabeth I granted a monopoly of trade on New Year’s Eve, 1600, creating the East India Company, and laying the foundations of the British Empire.

Such overseas exploits were only possible because of another great innovation of the Tudors: the navy. Every single maritime historian dates the beginning of the modern navy to Henry VIII. Previous kings had built ships, but the fleet of warships established under Henry was the first standing military force of its time, and the basis for Britain’s future dominance overseas. Under the Tudors we see the generation of a naval administration and bureaucracy, the installation of permanent staff, and investment in shipbuilding, dockyards, coastal fortifications, and a new type of manoeuvrable, ocean-going, cannon-carrying vessel – the most important maritime invention until the introduction of aircraft carriers.

Finally, the Tudor age was the era of the English Renaissance. The monarchs surrounded themselves with brilliant people like Hans Holbein, who was at the forefront of this first age of portraiture (painting the first full-length, life-size portrait of an English monarch), or the poets Sir Thomas Wyatt

and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who wrote the first sonnets in English. Henry VIII was the first king to authorise a Bible in English, and the lyrical phrasing of William Tyndale's New Testament, which infused the Great Bible of 1538–9 and the King James Bible of 1611, earned Tyndale the title of "architect of the English language". It was also the age of William Shakespeare. Ben Jonson described him as being "not of an age, but for all time", and his verse is so timeless and universal, so ingrained in our culture, so globally ubiquitous, that we forget that the bard was of a time: he was a Tudor.

So, one reason we are fascinated by the Tudors is simply because they matter. The other is the sheer weight of character. It is easy to caricature the much-married tabloid king, Henry VIII, or the unmarried virgin, Elizabeth I. Yet, in an age of personal monarchy, the sovereign's character was of crucial importance, and continues to attract us. There is something about the Tudor combination of bluff, prodigious majesty coupled with deep, abiding insecurity and continual intrigue that creates a sense of awe and suspense, even when we know the outcome of events.

Distrust is, arguably, the defining characteristic of the dynasty, and this quality was pivotal to the successes and failures of the reigns. Suspicion meant that no English king ever shed more blood than Henry VIII; while Elizabeth's reign was defined by her decision not to choose a successor – even on her deathbed! The only Tudor monarch who seems to have escaped this sense of paranoia was the young Edward VI, the only one born to the throne.

The irony is, then, that the great changes of the Tudor period – everything from the birth of the Church of England to the creation of the secret service – were a direct result of the inherent weakness of the dynasty: its distrust and suspicion.

This is an edited extract from the introduction to 'Tudors: The Illustrated History' by Richard Rex (Amberley Publishing)

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