Henry VII is the inscrutable Tudor. Less charismatic than Henry VIII or Elizabeth, less tragic than Edward or Mary, he stands no realistic chance in a Most Famous Tudor competition. But that is no reason to forget him.

We should admire Henry first for his tenacity. When he was propelled from exile to the English throne in 1485 by the sudden death of Edward IV, Richard III's seizure of the crown and the bloody battle of Bosworth, six of the last nine English kings had been deposed and the average was getting worse: each of the last four had lost the crown, one of them, the hapless Henry VI, twice. One quarter French, one quarter Welsh, one quarter descended from John of Gaunt by his mistress, Henry's claim to the throne of England was hardly compelling. Yet he defeated pretender after pretender – Lambert Simnel, Perkin Warbeck, Edmund de la Pole – and clung onto power. He made a virtue of healing old divisions by marrying Edward's daughter Elizabeth of York – a match symbolised by the red and white Tudor rose – and breeding sons to succeed him. And even when two sons out of three died, he saw Henry VIII safely onto the throne, the first king to pass the crown on successfully to his son in nearly a hundred years.

Henry was not just a survivor but a stabiliser. He was less trusting, less generous, less relaxed than many of his subjects might have liked: he is only recorded as laughing in public once. He put more faith in those he had seen tested in the crises of 1483-9 than in young noblemen who thought they ought to govern because of their titles and blood. He took more advice than previous kings from lawyers and financial administrators, men who told him what the crown's powers were and how he might use them to tighten his grip on the kingdom. He used fines for disobedience or for offences against his rights as a means of political control. His richer subjects did not like it, but losing your money to Henry VII was better than losing your head to Henry VIII.

He strengthened the crown both financially and in its ability to do justice. Wealth could not guarantee the safety of an incompetent king, but it could make domestic and international politics easier to navigate for a competent one. Henry expanded the crown's lands, drove up the customs by encouraging trade and attacking smuggling and piracy, and began to reform the taxes voted by parliament in time of war, tapping economic growth without retarding it in a way many governments might envy. The demands of the royal conscience and those of troubled subjects combined to make justice a key to good kingship. Henry offered his people faster and more effective decisions in their lawsuits at the centre, through the expanding judicial activity of the king's council, which would develop into the courts of Star Chamber and Requests. He did the same in regions far from Westminster, with revivified councils to oversee Wales and the North. In the counties justices of the peace were more numerous and better supervised. In small towns and villages the urge for stability coming up from below, stirred by patchy population growth, industrial development and the mobile, restless youth that came with them, met the determination to enforce order coming down from the king and his councillors.

Henry's achievements may not be as spectacular as those of his son and grandchildren, but he laid the foundations for every aspect of later Tudor rule. The calculated magnificence of Richmond Palace and his chapel at Westminster paved the way for Hampton Court and Nonsuch. His progresses took him to meet his subjects as far afield as Exeter and Newcastle, Raglan and Norwich, Knowsley and the Isle of Wight. He spread everywhere the family badges that would brand English kingship for the next century and survive to mark coins, tourist board signs and parliamentary buildings to the present day, Tudor roses and Beaufort portcullises. His patronage

both of church reformers like Bishop John Fisher and the Franciscan Observants and of lawyers who attacked the church's jurisdiction and skimmed off its wealth foreshadowed the mix of piety and power-play in the coming Reformation. His use of parliament to address problems in government and society prepared it for its role in the bigger changes ahead. His low-born but talented ministers – Reynold Bray, Thomas Lovell, Richard Empson, Edmund Dudley – were the forerunners of the meritocratic statesmen to come, Cromwell, Paget, Cecil, Bacon and the rest. He tied his family by marriage into the network of European dynasties, had his say in the politics of Italy, France and the Netherlands, and pursued alliances that favoured English trade, above all the cloth exports on which so many of his peoples' jobs depended.

It used to be said that the Middle Ages ended with Henry's reign. That is a gross simplification – what were the Middle Ages anyway? – but we should not lose sight of the changes afoot. Henry's government first made widespread use of printing, first welcomed Italian renaissance artists and gave the heirs to the throne a classical education, first sent permanent diplomatic representatives to multiple foreign courts, first established the navy with big new warships as a permanent arm of the state, first legislated against enclosure to defend the common people at a time of economic change, first patronised voyages of discovery to claim England's place among the European global empires. Henry made the first secure peace with France after the Hundred Years War and the first secure peace with the Scots after the Scottish Wars of Independence. The marriage alliance that sealed peace across the northern border would lead to the union of the crowns a century later in the person of his great-great-grandson James VI and I, and beyond that to the making of the United Kingdom. How's that for a long-term achievement?