

The King's Wars: Steven Gunn explores the impact of Henry VIII's wars on the lives of his subjects

One day in the early 1520s John Byrcham, Robert Saumon, Bartholomew Storme and Robert Wyndell of Whitby went out fishing. As they headed back to port with their catch they were intercepted by a French warship and taken prisoner. They negotiated a ransom of £22 6s 8d to free themselves, their ship and their fish, and Byrcham went into Whitby and on to Bridlington to get the money from the ship's owners, a widow called Elizabeth Dodys and William Browneflete, head of the town's rich Augustinian Priory. Byrcham returned and paid off the French, who let the ship go. The crew's relief did not last long, as they were captured by Scottish raiders before they could get back to harbour.

The Whitby fishermen's story belongs to the hidden history of Henry VIII's wars. Henry's posturing in European politics is well enough known, but the full impact of his wars on the people he ruled tends to be overlooked. Our attention is irresistibly drawn elsewhere: to his attacks on the church, the bloody politics of his court, or the social strains of enclosure, inflation and popular revolt. Yet Henry's people spent something like half his reign at war, against the French, the Scots, the Gaelic lords of Ireland, rebels at home, or even England's traditional allies in the Low Countries.

The armies and navies Henry raised were much larger than those of his predecessors. Some 45,000 Englishmen fought either in France or against the Scots in 1513, four times more than Henry V had drawn from a population not much smaller to conquer Normandy a century before. In 1545, faced with a French invasion, more than 110,000 men stood ready for action, perhaps one in six adult males or one in three of those fit to fight. Meanwhile Henry built more and bigger ships than any previous king and loaded them – in the case of the doomed *Mary Rose*, overloaded them – with fighting men and guns.

To assemble such large armies Henry used the recruitment structures developed in the Wars of the Roses. He called on noblemen and gentlemen to bring their estate tenants and household servants to serve him and towns to send their respectable citizens. This worked well enough for short civil war campaigns or to throw back invasions, but Henry's over-use of the system broke it. Arduous marches through France or the long sieges that came with ever more powerful firearms and the fortifications built to resist them did not appeal to men like the Leicestershire yeoman farmer Hugh Latimer, whose son, the preacher of the same name, fondly recalled helping him buckle on his armour to go and fight for Henry VII at the battle of Blackheath in 1497. Elis Gruffudd, a Welsh veteran whose reminiscences provide a wonderful window on life inside Henry's armies, complained about the 'many wealthy farmers' from Essex and Suffolk, who spent their time 'thinking of their wives and children and husbandry' and mutinied when it looked as though the campaign of 1523 would keep them in France into the biting winter.

At London the livery companies largely gave up drafting their craftsmen members for overseas service and found substitutes instead, men who all too often ran away with the clothes and weapons issued to them and sometimes had to be lodged in prison overnight before they marched off to war. Peers and gentlemen found their tenants ever more likely to refuse service and Henry at the end of his reign began to replace their retainers with drafts of militiamen raised by county muster commissioners. Henry's attempts to fund his wars met with equally ambiguous success. He managed to raise highly effective subsidies directly assessed on individual wealth or income, but some of his

taxes provoked opposition in parliament or revolts, and by the end of his reign taxpayers were reacting to repeated levies by under-assessing one another.

Even those who did not go to war were well aware of Henry's campaigns. Widely-sold astrological almanacs and widely-repeated prophecies attributed to sages like Merlin predicted their outcome. Manuscript newsletters and printed pamphlets narrated their events. Public festivities with bonfires, bell-ringing and barrels of beer greeted such successes as the burning of Edinburgh and capture of Boulogne in 1544. And we know that people talked about Henry's wars because sometimes they said the wrong thing. In January 1546 William Rye and Anthony Sprowston, riding across Norfolk, discussed how peace would make life easier for the hungry poor. Rye thought things must be even worse in France and Scotland, 'which the kyng's most noble grace has moste vycoriously and nobely . . . overcome', but Sprowston told Rye he was not impressed by the great English victory at Edinburgh. According to him Henry's troops merely plundered the town after a traitor let them in while most of the inhabitants were out at church or still in bed, an opinion which saw him hauled in for questioning before the magistrates of Norwich.

War also reached deep into the towns and villages of Henry's England through the king's demands that communities stockpile military equipment for their men. From the musters of 1539 the expectation that parishes should acquire 'township arms' was clearly stated and by the 1540s churchwardens' accounts and surveys of church goods show that many parishes were doing so. Often they sold off plate or vestments to fund their acquisitions in an imitation of the way the king used the dissolution of the monasteries to pay for war. Henry wanted his armies kitted out in the same modern style as those of his continental rivals, so parishes and boroughs were told to replace the assortments of hand-me-downs in their armouries with almain rivets, mass-produced German infantry armours, with pikes and with arquebuses, basic but effective handguns. Once they had them, it was a constant struggle to keep them. York ordered its men coming back from Scotland in 1542 to hand their armour in to their parish constable or pay compensation, and Foulsham in Norfolk complained in 1547 that they had sent out armour for twenty men and got none of it back, 'so that we remayne att thys tyme destytute not only for the maynteynyng off hys gracys wars, but also for the defence off oure owne persons'.

Towns, especially ports, were also expected to defend themselves against enemy attack. Top-of-the-range artillery pieces were beyond the reach of most civic budgets, so guns were loaned from the royal ordnance office to places like Poole and Great Yarmouth. When it came to fortifications, however, most towns were given advice by royal commissioners but left to their own devices as to how to organise the large-scale earthworks necessary to resist a possible siege. In various cases – Harwich in 1539, Rye in 1545 for example – forced labour by the inhabitants, even women and children, was the only viable option. Invasion scares touched smaller communities too, as they contributed to coastal bulwarks or maintained warning beacons that could be fired in the event of a landing. Everywhere Henry's wars, like his Reformation, made local authorities organise themselves more systematically and take more power over the populace.

Individuals as well as communities were meant to own arms. Muster returns, wills and household inventories show that the ownership of armour and weapons correlated closely with wealth, that men kept weapons all over their houses, even in the cheese store or the children's bedroom, and that they bequeathed them lovingly to their friends and relations. Compulsory archery practice could

be fun as men competed with their neighbours and bet on their skill, and once guns began to spread they became a desirable purchase, useful for pest control and defence against burglary when not on show at the musters.

In some ways the stakes in war were highest for the upper classes. They had the strongest sense of an inherited duty of military service. One Buckinghamshire knight, Sir Edward Don, noted in his household book in 1533 his determination 'no longer to lyve then to serve my naturel soveryne lorde in defending hym and hys realme in batayle as a man'. Successful campaigning could win honour, power and wealth: the men who went on to dominate the government of Edward VI, Edward Seymour and John Dudley, were the rising generals of Henry's last wars. Failure could bring ruin, as it did for their rival, Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, whose defeat at Saint-Etienne outside Boulogne in 1546 threw him into a downward spiral that ended in trial and execution. But honour and manliness seem to have been on many men's minds as they went to war. Model speeches for delivery to troops before battle did talk about loyalty to king and country, but stressed above all how the 'hope and likelyhod of victorie' lay 'in the manly harts of men, whiche will ever shewe their faces with courage of lyons towards their ennemyes'.

War disrupted economic life as John Byrcham and his companions found, making trade, fishing and border farming dangerous, but it was not bad for everyone's pockets. Captains and owners of privateering ships and the borderers who gathered thousands of sheep and cattle and hundreds of prisoners for ransom on raids into Scotland did well. Armourers got steady trade from keeping arms fit for service and cannon-founders, ship-builders and horse-dealers did good business. Many others found that war created substitute markets for those it interrupted. Cloth exports went down, but towns, parishes and landlords purchased cloth to dress their troops. Grain, cheese and meat were bought up to supply armies and navies. While church-building was dented by Henry's Reformation, his huge fortification campaigns made work for builders. As in later wars, women were drawn further into the workforce by the absence of men, crewing fishing boats when sailors were called away to man the king's fleets.

The draft was not a death sentence. Hand-to-hand combat or concentrated gunfire could be murderous, but casualties on the English side even in great battles like Flodden were not devastating. Diseases, mainly typhus, dysentery or plague, killed far more soldiers and sailors than did combat, but cities could lose a quarter of their population to a bad epidemic just as camps did. Many of Henry's soldiers came home and indeed commentators were impressed by the English ability to mobilise large forces of part-timers who then 'returned to cultivating the land and to their usual activities without tumult or the thought of it'.

The high rate of participation in Henry's wars was one of many features that made them important in shaping the king's relationship with his subjects and the role of war in national identity. Henry was insistent that his enemies were the enemies of his realm and his people, that his wars aimed to defend his subjects, that, as one circular letter put it, he daily endured 'manifolde paines and labore of body' and 'travell and care of mynde' to ensure 'the defence and preservacion of them their wiefes and children'. He fitted his wars into the history of his forerunners' great triumphs, triumphs celebrated in the cheap printed history books coming onto the market by the end of his reign, which contrasted such victories sharply with the cruel battles of the recent civil wars. The magnificence of Henry's campaigns, with their splendid royal banners and majestic ships, proclaimed the king's

greatness. Imported prints of the king in armour complemented the more pious image spread round parish churches in the frontispiece of the Great Bible. Wartime measures made the English differentiate themselves from the foreigners in their midst, as French and Scottish residents were arrested and their goods confiscated, but they also allowed a celebration of diversity, as the Welsh celebrated their heroics in Welsh verse and the residents of Norwich teased a Lancashire priest by telling him how it was the duke of Norfolk's men who had saved the North at Flodden.

Of course Henry's subjects were not always going to war or even thinking about war. Work and play, food and drink, love and children, heaven and hell loomed larger much of the time. But if we neglect Henry's wars and the many ways they affected his subjects, our understanding of Tudor England will lack a vital part.

Henry's war timeline

1511 English auxiliaries helped the Dutch against the neighbouring Duke of Guelders.

1512-14 In Henry's first war with France a failed attack on Gascony was followed by naval raids on the French coast and a campaign led by the king in 1513, which captured Thérouanne and Tournai.

1513 James IV of Scots, invading Northumberland in support of his French allies, was killed at Flodden.

1520 A small army sent to expand English control in Ireland achieved little.

1522-5 A second war with France saw more naval raids and land campaigns, including one in 1523 that crossed the Somme to threaten Paris, and parallel skirmishes with the Scots.

1527-9 An ineffectual war against the Low Countries failed to make its Habsburg rulers accept Henry's divorce.

1532-4 An inconclusive war of border raids was fought against the Scots.

1534 The largest English army sent to Ireland since the 1390s suppressed the Kildare rebellion, leading into seventy years of campaigning against the Gaelic lordships.

1536 The North rose against Henry's religious policies in the Pilgrimage of Grace and the South was mobilised against the revolt.

1539-40 Invasion threats from Catholic Europe prompted a campaign of coastal fortification and large musters.

1542-7 An inconclusive war against the Scots gained significance with the death of James V and an agreement to marry his daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, to Henry's son Edward, thus uniting the British kingdoms. When the Scots reneged on the treaty, Henry tried to force their compliance by brutal warfare.

1543-6 In Henry's last war with France he captured Boulogne in 1544 and hung onto it at vast cost, though abandoned by his allies and threatened by a French invasion fleet in 1545.