10 What impact did the Wars of the Roses really have?

When did the Wars of the Roses end?

Time off for good behaviour
There is no enquiry activity in this chapter. Clearly it is investigating the impact of the Wars but it's just here to be read and reflected upon. Of course, you could always develop an enquiry of your own!

Bosworth didn't end the wars. They didn't end at one specific moment but faded away slowly. Henry VII's greatest problem was the lack of confidence and security felt by nobles and gentry. In 1483 there'd been the shock of a new king 'out of the blue' and then again in 1485 with Henry himself. Why not a third new king? This thought gave any challenger hope and made men cautious about backing the king.

In 1487 Henry faced a repeat of his own invasion, headed by John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, nephew of Edward IV, Richard III and their sister, Margaret of Burgundy. Margaret supplied experienced mercenaries, reinforced by Irish soldiers. Briefly this invasion looked a real threat but there was little English support for the invaders and the nobility backed Henry, his army double the size of the invading force at the battle of Stoke.

Henry ploughed on, surviving what are often called Yorkist plots but were really the work of outsiders and malcontents. They had minimal support but the possibility of foreign involvement always created a sense of renewed danger. The length of time it took the wars to fade is evidence of how much uncertainty had been created by events since the 1450s.



▷ Henry VII (1485–1509). This wonderful sculpture by Pietro Torrigiano is at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. What's remarkable is that from a distance Henry looks majestic, but move closer and you can see exhaustion and illness; the sculpture was made from his death mask.

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What impact did the wars have?

This question seems simple, but you're well aware by now that questions about the wars are trickier than they seem because of the limitations of the evidence. To answer this question with certainty, we'd need evidence of how people were reacting to events but such direct evidence doesn't exist. The best we can do is to infer how people may have seen and experienced the wars. So be ready for another burst of 'probably' and 'perhaps'!

The impact of the battles

The obvious place to start is by asking 'how much fighting was there?' but historians' answers differ, depending on how they define 'fighting' (not because they can't add up). Professor Lander estimated just 12 or 13 weeks of military campaigns. Professor Goodman said 61 weeks, including armies marching to and from battles. Professor Pollard suggested over two years, including localised events such as sieges in the north east in 1462–3. However, none sounds as if fighting dominated the whole period and there were many years without battles: 1456–58, 1465–68, 1472–84. This has led to the view that the wars had little impact on people because the 'quantity' of fighting was so limited.

However, doing sums does not tell the full story. It can't tell us about the psychological impact of the wars. We do have to be tentative but, though campaigns were short, it's likely their psychological impact on people was considerable. The six battles between 1459 and 1461 were spread out, but the anxiety can never have disappeared because another battle was always likely. And just when they may really have thought peace had returned, between 1471 and 1483, hope was destroyed by the upheavals of 1483 and 1485.

Estimating the numbers involved in fighting also tells us little. Most battles sound small, only 5000 at St Albans in 1455, and around 10,000 at the battles of 1471 and 1485. The numbers of casualties were therefore much smaller, but every individual killed or wounded was part of a circle of relatives and friends, which immediately widens the numbers 'involved', exactly as news of a death today devastates the immediate family and then ripples through communities. We get few glimpses of this human reality but here are two insights. In 1471 Sir John Paston and his brother, also John, fought in the Earl of Oxford's retinue at the battle of Barnet. Four days later Sir John wrote to reassure their mother:

> … my brother John is alive and fares well and in no peril of death. He is hurt with an arrow on his right arm below his elbow. I have sent him a surgeon who has dressed the wound and he trusts he shall be well in a short time …

This seems like a son writing an almost matter of fact letter to reduce his mother's worries, but what lay behind these calm words? What was the impact of the march to the battle, the wait for it to begin, the wound itself, wondering if it was infected, and the anxiety of the family at home, all replicated thousands of times for each conflict? Such experiences could not be quickly forgotten just because the survivors returned home.

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For **Anne Herbert** see pages 5, 53 and 139, especially the Raglan ring on page 5.

And many soldiers did not return home. Anne Herbert's husband, William, was executed on Warwick's orders after the battle of Edgecote in 1469. In his will Herbert asked Anne to take the vow of chastity she'd promised to take if he died. Everything we know of her later life suggests she did.

Did the wars cause much damage?

Professor Pollard's statement that 'for most of the time the wars caused little suffering to most of the people' seems true, but the devil is in the words underlined. Not everyone was unscathed. For example, what if you'd been in Ludlow in 1459 after the Yorkist leaders fled? According to *Gregory's Chronicle*, the royal army 'when they had drunk all the wine in the taverns smote off the heads of the pipes and hogsheads of wine so men went wet-shod in wine and then they robbed the town and took away bedding, cloth and other stuff and defouled many women.'

Or if you'd been in the path of Queen Margaret's army heading south early in 1461? According to *The English Chronicle* they robbed 'all the country and people as they came, spoiling abbeys and churches and bearing away chalices, books and other ornaments'. Other sources wrote of looting of money and clothing and of arm animals driven off for food.

So, while there was little destruction overall, there was localised damage which brought considerable suffering. The general lack of damage was not accidental. Armies were on campaign only briefly and, in a civil war, looting was a major mistake, creating support and propaganda for the opposition. However, again, there's a difference between real impact and fear. An army may not have harmed anyone in its vicinity but this didn't mean local people weren't fearful. In 1460, for example, fear of fighting led the town of Hull to improve its defences. Ditches were dug, guns mounted, watch kept and an iron chain placed across the river, all leading to the town's being £210 in debt, which local people had to pay.

Impact on the nobility and gentry

We know (page 00) that there was a very high rate of involvement among nobles in the battles of 1459–61. However, when in 1471 Warwick wrote to one of his gentry retainers, Henry Vernon, 'Henry I pray you fail not now as ever I may do for you', Vernon did fail Warwick. He stayed at home rather than fight against Edward IV. Does this example suggest that nobles and gentry were more inclined to avoid involvement in warfare as time went on?

It's harder to be definite about their involvement in 1471 and 1485 because the evidence is patchy. For example, there's no evidence to show that the Yorkist Walter Devereux fought for Edward in 1471, but he probably did as Edward made him a Knight of the Garter in 1472. It is likely that men thought long and hard about fighting in 1471 and 1485 because the outcomes were unclear and because the leaders did not have such long-term claims on their loyalty as had Henry VI. It's probable that fewer nobles and gentry did fight, but this means not that they were indifferent to the country's needs but that sanity suggested caution.

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It used to be said that the wars destroyed many noble families but that is not true. The greatest sufferers were those closely related to the king. Henry VI had a wide range of cousins and later there was a healthy brood of Yorkist sons, but by 1485 these royal families had been almost completely destroyed. The battles of 1459–71 and the Yorkists' tendency to murder each other had cut down the royal family to the barest Beaufort bones. Apart from the royal families, only a very few families were wiped out by battle and execution. Some others (e.g. the Hungerfords) did lose power and wealth, but perhaps the widest impact was a greater awareness that land and power could be lost if a wrong choice were made of who to support. Again, this suggests increased uncertainty and caution.

Impact on the monarchy

At the beginning of the wars respect for the monarchy was extremely high, despite Henry VI's incompetence. Despite the fighting of 1459–64 and 1469–71, there seems to have been little reduction in that respect, evidenced by Edward IV's authority in his second reign. However, the double usurpations of 1483 and 1485 may have affected the status of the monarchy. There is little sign under Richard III and Henry VII of the widespread personal loyalty felt to Henry VI and this lack of core loyalty made both kings appear insecure. What worked in their favour was not deep loyalty but more ordinary factors. Many individuals carried on their service in government because they believed this was the best way to serve the country, regardless of whether they felt great loyalty to the king. Second, there was general dislike of rebellion and warfare and an unwillingness to risk a family's welfare in a political cause. The status of the monarchy took time to recover from the events of 1483–85. One change increasing the monarchy's strength was that many gentry, under Edward IV and Henry VII, developed stronger direct links with the monarch as members of the royal household and so increased royal authority in the counties. By 1485 the monarch himself also had more land because a smaller royal family meant that less was given to royal relatives.

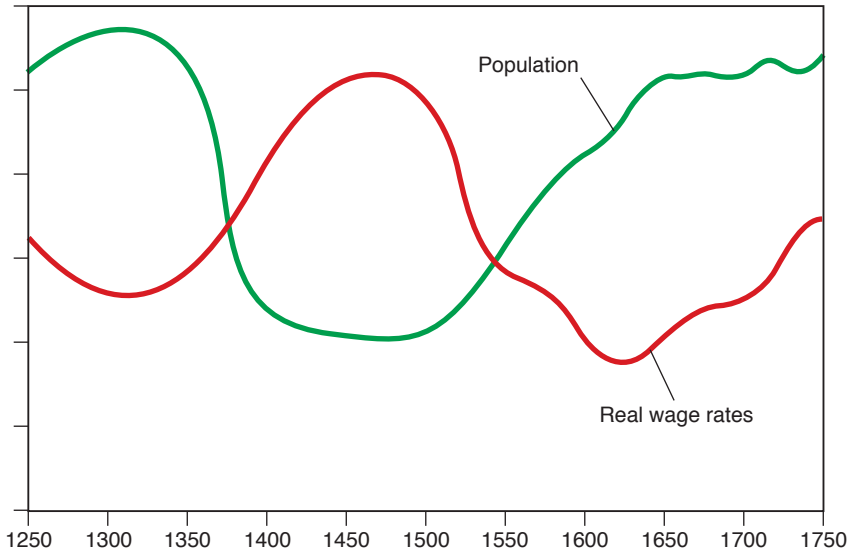
Is the internet a valuable source for studying the Wars of the Roses?

It can be, but you have to take the same care as when assessing the reliability of a historical source. Do you know who wrote the online material? Is the author an expert and objective or does s/he have an enthusiasm that leads to one-sided accounts of events or people? Is the website up-to-date with the latest research or based on old material? One excellent site is the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Its articles are written by named historians. You just need a local authority library membership number for access.

http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/index.html

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▷ This graph shows changes in the value of the 'real wages' of a craftsman in relation to the population of England. Ups and downs were usually the result of the quality of the harvest or outbreaks of plague, not the result of anxiety over who would win a battle!



Did people care about the wars?

Castles were built for comfort, not warfare. See pages 50–51

Again this is a difficult question to answer, especially for the commons. We know from the documents written by Cade's rebels in 1450 that they showed considerable awareness of national politics. It seems unlikely that this awareness would have been any less over the next forty years. Supporting evidence comes from the public documents created at each crisis by leaders (York, Edward IV, Warwick, Richard of Gloucester) to win support from the merchant class and the commons. The Paston letters include numerous newsletters reporting on the latest political events, showing great interest amongst the gentry.

So, many people did care about these events but that doesn't mean the wars dominated most people's lives. Ordinary life went on as it always does and for many people this was a good time to live, one of prosperity, especially in the south and Midlands. As the graph shows, the value of wages was not only high but higher than it was to be again for many decades. Workers spent their money on better clothing, on food and on educating their children, which helped increase the level of literacy. Many larger houses and churches were expensively rebuilt, the churches with money donated by local people, especially by merchants in wool and cloth. Very importantly, William Caxton brought printing to England *c.*1475, one of the most significant technological developments in English history. All this suggests that England was not a country dominated by war, gloom and disaster but a country in which many people lived well. No wonder they did not want war.


Here followeth the fyrth boke of the noble and worthy prynce kyng Arthur.

◁ A page from Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur,* one of the first books to be printed in England. Early books looked as much like handwritten books as possible, because handwritten versions were still seen as 'the real thing' and were far more expensive. Malory wrote his stories in the 1450s and 1460s and his preoccupation with the idea of the Round Table of knights united behind King Arthur may suggest the desire to return to the 'good old days' before civil warfare broke out.

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Why had battles been fought when nobody wanted civil war?

It's time to reach some conclusions to our overall question discussed on page 11 and 72: **If loyalty was so important and people did not want civil war, why did the Wars of the Roses – with all the battles and changes of kings – take place at all?**

The Victorian historians were wrong! The wars didn't happen because the monarchy, as a system, was weak or because nobles, as a group, had too much power. Instead, there's a complex mix of reasons:

- In the beginning there was a particularly weak king, Henry VI. Henry's failure to provide stability and unity allowed grievances to grow.
- Individual nobles acted out of fear to protect their positions. Fear drove actions and reactions from the 1450s.
- Feelings of insecurity increased over time. The upheavals of 1469–71 prevented the fears of the 1450s from fading. In 1471 Edward IV's return almost restored national stability but Richard III was always insecure on the throne, making further conflict likely.
- Conflicts were linked to decisions and events in other countries, where rulers wanted either to destabilise or to support English kings for their own reasons.
- Two individuals, Warwick and Richard of Gloucester, had unexpected reactions to difficult situations. We can't be certain of their motives but each man took a first step, unable to foresee the consequences of that action, and found himself carried onwards by events and other people's reactions.
- Loyalty itself led to conflict. The conflict of 1483–85 arose not solely out of Richard III's actions but also from the resistance of members of Edward IV's household, loyal to young Edward V.

It's the complexity of the factors and the way they became entangled that overwhelmed the general desire for peace, a situation that has recurred time and time again in history.

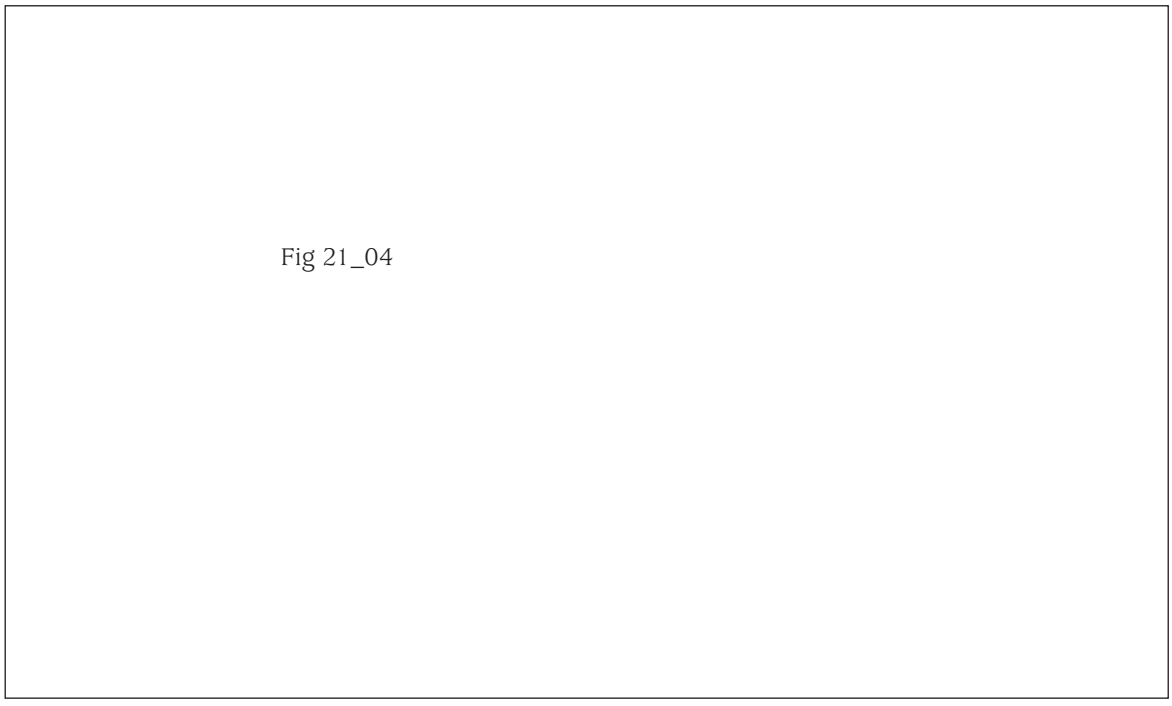
In examining individuals' motives for their actions we have to remember one thing: these were real, individual people who shared principles and ideals. We can only begin to understand their choices and actions if we respect the people we study. In her book *The Wars of the Roses*, Professor Carpenter rightly identifies the importance of:

> … respecting the people we study; not deriding them for having beliefs we do not share nor dismissing them as aliens who share nothing with us at all. If the apparently incoherent politics of the last sixty years of the fifteenth century are studied as a period in which human beings with certain kinds of expectations were suddenly confronted with the wholly unexpected and struggled to understand and to cope with it, as human beings will, they begin to make a surprising amount of sense.

Respect, not derision, is what we owe the past. Our understanding of the Wars of the Roses has moved on a long way. It will keep improving if we respect the people of the time, which brings us to our last two pages.

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Were people then so very different from us?



△ A reconstruction drawing by Ivan Lapper of Fountain's Court at Raglan Castle in the 1460s. William and Anne Herbert rebuilt Raglan (see page 53) to reflect William's power. He dominated Wales for Edward IV, their son married one of Queen Elizabeth's sisters, and William was the first Welshman to be made an Earl.

The people in the picture don't look very like us. Their clothes are certainly different! And when we quickly compare then and now many other differences are obvious. They had no electricity, no anaesthetics, no cars. Their lives revolved around the farming year. They wrote about 'the Saturday next before St Margaret's Day', not Saturday 18 July. They can't have been like us at all. And there's one more thing: can you imagine fighting in armour, swinging a poll-axe to kill another man? For a long time that seemed to me the biggest difference, the acceptance of learning to kill another human being at close range.

And then one day I was looking at a photograph of my Dad, in the army, in Burma in 1943. Until he was 26, he'd spent his spare time playing sports, a cricket bat the nearest he'd come to a weapon. Then in 1939 he joined the Army and was taught to use a bayonet and to kill people. I don't know if he did. He never talked about his war-years, though just once he briefly described wading through swamps, bayonet fixed, waiting for an attack.

And my grandfather went through the same experience, from clerk to soldier, in the Great War. So, perhaps the differences, the real human differences, aren't as great as I thought. We can never really know, but perhaps we have more in common with the people of the fifteenth century than we might think. Listen to this mother – she sounds like mine or might be yours – but it's actually Agnes Paston nagging her son John in 1443:

> be well dieted of meat and drink, for that is the greatest help that you may have now to your health ward.

In other words, eat properly and look after yourself!

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What about friendship? This may seem a strange topic to end with when we've been studying wars famed for battles and never-ending feuds. But was everyone consumed by hatred? Some people were, but fewer perhaps than we might think. This final instalment of Anne Herbert's story (see pages 5, 53 and 133) tells a different tale. It's the story of two women who once stood talking in the courtyard of Raglan Castle, just like the people in the picture.



△ Anne Herbert, Countess of Pembroke. Her brother, Walter Devereux, died at Bosworth fighting against Henry VII

Fig 21_06

△ Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII. She is often portrayed as a real Lancastrian harridan, ruthlessly plotting and conniving for her son to become king

It's easy to assume that these two women hated each other. Anne's brother was killed fighting against Margaret's son. Yet the evidence suggests they were friends. Back on the 1460s Anne and her husband had brought up Margaret's son, young Henry of Richmond (Henry VII) alongside their sons, William and Walter. Documents record Margaret visiting Raglan and the Herberts planned that young Henry would marry their daughter, Maud. However, when Edward IV returned in 1471, Henry was taken to Brittany. Maud married the Earl of Northumberland instead. Anne did not meet Henry again until days after Bosworth when she was summoned to meet the new king. I'd bet a decent sum that it was a friendly meeting and that Henry's mother, Margaret Beaufort, was there. Why? It seems that Anne and Margaret had built a lasting friendship. There are no letters to prove this, just one intriguing clue. Twenty years later, Margaret owned a palace at Collyweston. Though Anne had died by then, Margaret kept rooms in her palace for one of Anne's daughters. That suggests a bond between the families, a sign of Margaret's gratitude to the Herberts for their care in bringing up her son.

This seems a good place to end, with two women who became friends despite the violence around them; a reminder of the qualities shared by people across time and place, a reminder of the humanity we share with the people who lived through the Wars of the Roses.

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