



### Henry VII's Lady Chapel teachers' notes

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#### Follow-up questions

1. To what extent was propaganda necessary for the consolidation of Henry's power and authority?
2. How far would canonisation of Henry VI (had it occurred), have further validated Henry VII's claim to the throne?
3. 'Religious belief and piety was the main reason behind Henry's lavish spending on the building of Westminster Abbey's Lady Chapel'. Discuss.
4. How important was it to have clear symbolism and imagery when establishing a new dynasty in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century?

#### Transcript

This is Henry VII's Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey. Imagine you were standing here on a warm sunny day with sunlight pouring through the stained-glass windows onto the gold below. How would you describe it?

The 16<sup>th</sup> century historian John Leland had high praise indeed. He described it as 'the wonder of the world'. No expense was spared in the building of it. The total cost is thought to be around £20,000, an enormous sum at that time, and this from a king known for being careful with his money. This hugely expensive chapel was built for several reasons. It was built to honour the Virgin Mary and it's known as the Lady Chapel. It was built to house Henry's own tomb and as a place for prayers for the repose of his soul after death. Finally it was built to house the tombs of the whole Tudor family, giving the country a visual confirmation of this new royal dynasty.

Henry's Lancastrian claim to the throne was through his mother Lady Margaret Beaufort. This was a shaky claim since her line was originally illegitimate and barred from the succession. His other shaky claim was that his father was the half-brother of King Henry VI. In fact, his real claim to the throne rested on his victory at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. Henry realised the importance of establishing himself as the rightful heir to the throne rather than as a warmongering usurper. His connection to past kings would need to be proven.

Westminster Abbey had been the coronation church since 1066 and the final resting place of many medieval monarchs. The most prestigious place for royal burial in the Abbey was around the Shrine of St

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Edward the Confessor. There you will find the tombs of the Plantagenet kings Henry III, Edward I, Edward III, Richard II, as well as the most famous of the Lancastrian kings, Henry V.

A burial spot in the grand royal circle around St Edward's shrine would have been ideal for Henry Tudor to cement his place in the royal line. Unfortunately all the spots were already taken. So Henry conceived the idea of a new shrine at Westminster Abbey and a new saint too. He worked hard to secure the canonisation of his great uncle Henry VI by sending a petition to the Pope in Rome. The plan was that Henry VI's body would be moved to the Abbey and reburied in a new glorious shrine, around which Henry Tudor and his descendants would be buried. Work on this new chapel began in 1503.

But in 1509 Henry died. The chapel was unfinished. The negotiations with the Pope about Henry VI's canonisation were ongoing but floundered over the high price that was quoted. Building work on the chapel continued under Henry VIII, who also commissioned a magnificent tomb for his parents, but the idea of creating a new shrine for a new saint was quietly dropped. Henry VI was never canonised and his body remained at Windsor. The only allusion to him in the whole chapel is this rather humble small wooden statue.

So did that matter? Had Henry VII failed in his ambitions? What we have here is one of the most magnificent examples of late medieval architecture in Europe. Take a look at the stunning hand-carved fan-vaulted ceiling, the rippling curtain walls and the perpendicular windows. In addition, the chapel contains the largest surviving collection of figure sculpture from early Tudor England. 96 of the original 107 statues of saints and prophets can still be seen today. They were chosen by Henry VII himself and they were in place before his death in 1509. The saints gaze down protectively over the tomb of Henry and his wife Elizabeth of York.

It is impossible to miss the visual cues stamped all over the chapel which highlight that this royal family were legitimate, closely bound to previous kings and here to stay. All of Henry's personal symbols can be found here: the greyhound of Richmond; the dragon of Wales; the Beaufort portcullis; and the double rose of the Tudors.

If you stand in the Lady Chapel looking to the east, you would be looking at the tomb of Henry VII. Turn and look towards the west and the next freestanding tomb in a direct line is that of Henry V. West again from Henry V is the tomb of St Edward the Confessor. They are all in a line. So Henry Tudor might not have had a straightforward claim to the throne in life but in death, the continuity of his line is inescapable.