

Henry on Tour – exploring the progresses of Henry VIII

Theme 1

Henry VIII's royal progresses would have been a magnificent **spectacle** and a remarkable logistical undertaking. Henry could travel with a huge **entourage** of hundreds – sometimes thousands – of people. The group would have been diverse, including men and women, high-born **courtiers** and officials, and lower-born musicians, actors and tradespeople. Henry also took hundreds of personal items with him, including a four-poster bed and writing desk, not to mention his wardrobe and jewels! Watching the horses, carts and their luggage stretch on for miles must have been an incredible sight! Imagine the sound that such a fantastic group would create, 'rumbling through the countryside' on their travels of between 15 and 20 miles per day!

When Henry arrived at each stop, he would be announced by trumpets and greeted at the city gates by the most notable people of the town. Bells would be rung and, as Henry passed through the gates, plays would be performed by the townspeople. Following this, Henry would usually attend a service in the local cathedral or church, which was often the high point of his visit. In fact, during Henry's progress to the Field of Cloth of Gold, 'sing offs' were reported between the French and English choirs!

The sleeping arrangements for Henry and his entourage would have been a huge undertaking! They might stay in religious houses, the houses of local gentlemen or even local inns. Henry was commonly known to provide his own tents. For example, he took 200 to York in 1541. However, these were not tents as we might imagine camping today! The King's tents were full of the richest **tapestries** and luxuries imaginable, and would have included that four-poster bed he liked to travel with!

Hunting parties and **banquets** were another spectacle of progress. Banquets would include many courses of varied and exotic food, such as ginger, nutmeg, saffron and raisins, to demonstrate wealth. Towns would frequently have to share their cooking equipment to ensure that the catering could occur on the scale required! Banquets would take place in lavishly decorated rooms, with walls covered in tapestries and dressers stacked high with valuable gold and silver tableware. Torchbearers would be placed strategically to encourage light to glimmer and reflect off this extravagant tableware. Unsurprisingly, the cost of a royal progress was huge. In preparation for Henry's visit to Beaulieu, the clerk of the Great Wardrobe was given £1 million to spend on decorations for the King's visit. In one six-week period, Henry spent more than £4.6 million on food alone! In 1522, it was feared that 514, 483 bottles of wine might not be enough for Henry's visit!

Theme 2

Henry had many reasons for undertaking journeys of such a complex nature, and there were many factors influencing the routes that he decided to take. Fundamental motives were wealth and power. Royal journeys were an opportunity for Henry to show off his wealth and could be used as a **diplomatic** tool to impress foreign ambassadors and kings. They were a fantastic opportunity for Henry to dispense **patronage** in person and ensure the loyalty of his subjects, but also to keep his ear to the ground regarding the public mood and to gather intelligence. Henry also used the opportunity to survey the properties of his countrymen, sometimes finding a way in which to ensure that the ones that he liked fell into his own possession! He owned over 60 great properties by the time of his death! Surveying property became an even more important element of his progresses in the 1530s, when the dissolution of the monasteries began. Henry's desire to show power could also take a more sinister turn if visiting areas that had shown him disloyalty or rebellion. During his visit to York in 1541, he added 4,000 soldiers to his retinue as a means of intimidation and forced the town's notables to receive him on their knees in the mud.

Henry's progresses were also influenced by his own health and happiness. There was perhaps an obvious decline in the distances that he travelled after 1536, when he suffered a jousting accident from which his health never recovered. Sometimes, Henry's progresses were smaller and more informal in scale and dictated by his desire to visit a particular place of **pilgrimage**, to hunt or to attempt a break from the stresses and responsibilities of kingship.

Theme 3

Royal progresses could be hugely beneficial for the places that Henry visited. The preparation for the King's visit alone would have created many job opportunities. It was very common for towns to carry out extensive repair work on buildings and infrastructure before the King arrived, creating work for stonemasons, carpenters, painters and glaziers. Usually, everyone wanted to look their best and display their wealth, which also created lots of extra business for merchants and traders. Access to the King also offered opportunities for individuals to petition the King directly for a swifter personal **dispensation** of justice.

However, Henry VIII's progresses didn't always have positive consequences. Much of the food provided would have been hunted or fished from the local area. Consequently, Henry's progresses have been likened to a swarm of locusts, cutting through the local area and leaving it bare. After Henry's progress of 1522, the army was delayed in its departure to France, as they couldn't find enough supplies for the journey! Towns and cities were also expected to offer the King gifts during his stay. In 1541, this bankrupted the city of York, who gave the King £100 of gold that it couldn't afford! There were also occasions where towns had prepared for months for Henry's visit, and then he didn't show up! For example, this happened to Bristol in 1535, due to an outbreak of plague.