The last decade of Henry VI’s reign was overshadowed by political unrest which culminated in a period of civil war known as the Wars of the Roses. During this time, Henry and his rightful heir were discarded in favour of another claimant, and in 1461 the Lancastrian army was defeated by Edward, Duke of York who became King Edward IV in 1462. Although Henry was restored to the throne in 1470 his second reign was short-lived, and he was put to death in the Tower on 21 May 1471. Almost immediately, Henry was venerated as saintly martyr and Edward’s successor, Richard III, was shrewd enough to capitalize on the dead king’s reputation by ordering the removal of Henry’s body from Chertsey Abbey to a new shrine at St George’s Chapel, Windsor.

When the Yorkist line came to an end with Richard’s death at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, Henry’s nephew and name-sake, Henry Tudor became king. A monarch who was totally unknown to nearly all of his abruptly acquired subjects could not afford to miss any opportunity to win popular affection and esteem, and Henry VII fostered his uncle’s reputation to bolster his new regime. Pilgrims began to flock to Windsor to seek miracles at the tomb of ‘the glorious King Henry’, and Henry VII launched an official campaign to secure his uncle’s canonization, with petitions to several popes. He also ordered the compilation of a book of miracles allegedly worked by his martyred ancestor, and planned a new tomb for his remains at Westminster.

The cult of King Henry was made familiar to Londoners by the mass-production of pilgrim souvenirs; and 500 of these, featuring Henry in different versions, have now been excavated in London. They show how greatly King Henry was venerated by ordinary Londoners for a brief period at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries, and they provide a clear indication of the power of Tudor propaganda. Contemporary records attest to the popularity of the cult in London, and there are many accounts of people who were saved or cured by the miraculous intervention of the martyred king, such as Helen Barker of St Martin Ongar who cut her throat in a fit of insanity, but was healed when the name of King Henry had been invoked. Then in July 1491 eleven-year old Elizabeth Styrman of Stratford at Bow recovered from the plague after her father vowed to go barefoot to Windsor and ‘took the measure of her
body’, so that a candle exactly her length could be offered at the shrine. Many children were similarly cured of disease and injury and in a house in Thames Street in 1499, one boy with a disfiguring lesion on his lip, was entrusted to the care of King Henry whereupon he left the room and was shortly to be seen on the muddy foreshore of the Thames, shouting to his mother, ‘King Henry has thrown me on the ground and rolled me about till my lip bled. And he has told me to come to him, riding with you, mother, and not on my wooden horse.’ Miles Freebridge of London, a baby from Aldermanbury, had accidentally swallowed a pilgrim badge of St Thomas Becket in 1486 and began to choke to death. His father prayed to Henry VI, whereupon Miles coughed up the badge and was saved.

Attempts to beatify Henry VI came to an end with the Reformation and even though there was a Society of Henry VI at the end of the 20th century, historians have taken a less charitable view of Henry VI’s reputation as a pious and virtuous monarch.

Further reading: