

David Starkey at the OUHS
Report by Tom Barker, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

My tutor once suggested to me that historians who become famous are those who argue that change was rapid and revolutionary, rather than incremental. Sure enough, David Starkey – a king in the realm of historical celebrity – began by arguing that Henry VIII's reign was *the* turning point in English history. He went on to maintain that real insight into this period of radical change in England could only really be gained by examining the youth, education and upbringing of the young prince.

It is unsurprising that Starkey sees Britain's radical shift as being the Tudor period, his area of specialisation. Indeed, there are important and undeniable discontinuities in this period; most obviously there were religious changes, but, just as important, Henry's reign saw a shift from the French dominated court of his father to a more English realm. Yet, for such a radical claim, such (albeit important) changes fail to justify the singling out of the Tudor period as being more important than other periods as a turning point. Certainly, the religious changes of Henry's reign are significant. Yet, Starkey did not explain how they outweighed, for example, the combination of political and institutional changes of the glorious revolution in the following century, which were also accompanied by radical religious change in the replacement of Charles II by William III. Controversial as Starkey's claim certainly is, it does not seem relevant to the rest, and main part, of his argument.

The central part of Starkey's talk – and of his book – was about the youth of Henry VIII. He believes Henry VIII is best understood by separating his life into two parts: his youth and later years. The public is familiar with the Holbein's painting showing a dominant, masculine figure. Yet this is the Henry of the 1530s, not the malleable youth of the 1510s. To understand the reign as a whole, Starkey claimed, we had to turn to Henry's youth, before his coronation in 1509, when he was being educated and being influenced by those around him to the greatest degree.

First, the political atmosphere in which Henry lived was important to his development. To understand the context Starkey made a second seemingly radical claim: Henry VII was (essentially) a French king. He invaded England with 10 ships and 2,500 men – of which 2,000 were French. The result of this was twofold. First, it resulted in a predominantly French court and this, as we shall see, had an effect on Henry's education.

Second, the apparent ease with which the crown was taken encouraged a large number of pretenders to the throne, the most threatening of which was the Duke of Suffolk. Indeed, the insecurity of the realm was such, suggested Starkey, that the wars of the Roses only really ended in 1509 with the reconciliation of the houses of York and Lancaster.

Second, the household in which Henry grew up affected his character. While Arthur, Henry's brother, was taken away from the court to be educated for governance, Henry grew up without the preparation expected of a king. Instead, he grew up in a female dominated household with his sisters and mother. Yet, as the only boy in the household, he never felt the influence of his elder brother and the fact that he was second son was never brought home to him. I'm not sure what you mean when you say 'it seemed insignificant that he was the second son' – can you rephrase or clarify? Do you mean that he was not considered significant because he was the second son? If so, can you make this clearer? Moreover, his proximity to London would mean that he was in a good position to get to know the local elites.

Third, Henry's education differed from his predecessors. Henry was an extraordinarily well educated king. At the age of eight years old, Henry met Erasmus and Thomas More. The result of this was that Henry's education shifted away from the traditional education of Bernard André, a French Humanist, who had tutored Henry's brother. Henry therefore became the first English prince to be fully inculcated in Latin. Moreover, it was at Wolsey's suggestion that Henry was educated in theology. It is this education that would give him the confidence to take on the pope, Starkey suggested.

In questions after the talk Starkey was asked what went wrong with Henry's reign and what would explain the transformation of the 'good' Henry to the 'bad'. Starkey suggested that it was his attraction for Anne Boleyn. Although it is true that big events can have small causes, in this instance it seems unsatisfactory and begs the question what caused Henry to take the radical step of divorcing Catherine of Aragon and break away from papal authority which he had always been loyal to in his earlier life. In this way, although Starkey aptly described the two Henrys, the youthful and the older, what he failed to do in the talk was explain why and how the transformation from the first to the second took place. Moreover, this division of Henry's life into his youth and later years is useful as we have seen above, but fails to explain the return of Henry to more conservative ways towards the end of his life.

Overall, Starkey was able to open a new angle on a well discussed area of history. He effectively showed how Henry's youth was important in the formation of his adult life. Yet, in the talk, Starkey failed to explain how effective Henry was in governing the rest of the country. While Starkey's talk left certain questions unanswered, no doubt the book, *Henry: Virtuous Prince*, will help provide the answers.