

What makes a good medieval king? Case study: Edward III

4 Could medieval kings always do whatever they wanted?

Edward's father, Edward II, was a very weak king. There were civil wars and lots of crime and chaos in England. He was murdered in 1327 by his wife, Queen Isabella, and her lover, Roger Mortimer. They made 14-year-old Edward, king, but ruled the country for him. Then, when Edward was 18 he had Mortimer arrested and executed and he started to rule England himself.

Now I am king

Edward was tall, strong and an excellent soldier. He knew that the best way to stop quarrels between the nobles was to get them fighting on the same side – in wars against Scotland and France.

In 1333 Edward won a great victory against the Scots at the Battle of Halidon Hill.

Next, Edward went to war with France. In 1346, he invaded France and faced a large French army at the battle of Crécy. Again Edward was the winner, thanks to the English knights and archers. The king's 16-year-old son, also called Edward, fought in the heaviest fighting at Crécy. The prince became known as the Black Prince, probably because he wore black armour. Two months later King Edward captured the King of Scotland in the battle of Neville's Cross in the North of England.

Edward was very popular with his nobles. They joined his army because he was successful and because they won land and money. Edward trusted his nobles and asked their advice. His father had been a failure because he did not trust his nobles and because he lost wars with Scotland and France.

Edward always looked and behaved like a king. He loved expensive clothes and jewels. He rebuilt Windsor Castle in an impressive style. He also tried to be like the fictional King Arthur. He held tournaments and jousts where the knights competed for prizes. He called his bravest knights the Knights of the Garter. They were meant to be like King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

In 1348 the Black Death reached England. Nearly half the population died from this terrible disease. When it ended, ordinary people thought they could get higher wages because there weren't enough workers, but Edward made a law saying that everyone had to work for the same wages as before the Black Death. This was hard on ordinary people but good for the nobles and other landowners who didn't have to pay out more wages.

The Black Death didn't stop Edward fighting for long, although one of his daughters died of the disease. In 1356 he invaded France again, won the Battle of Poitiers and captured the King of France. He freed the French king in return for a huge ransom and the promise that England could keep a large part of southern France.

You are guilty and will be heavily punished

England was more peaceful while Edward was king. He could not stop all crimes but the worst gangs of criminals were punished. There were no civil wars or rebellions because Edward got on well with the nobles. Edward was also good at getting parliament to give him money for his wars.

Edward's last years were not so successful. As he grew old he became sick. Edward's wife Queen Philippa and many of his old friends died. His new advisers seemed more interested in getting rich than helping the king. Edward was too old to lead his army himself, and France fought back successfully in the war, even raiding the English coast. England lost nearly all its possessions in France.

It was important for a king to have a son. The son automatically became heir to the throne and this meant there were no quarrels about who the next king should be. Edward had many children. His eldest son, the Black Prince, died in 1376, making the Black Prince's son, Richard, heir to the throne. When Edward died in 1377, Richard II became king when he was only 10 years old. Everyone was anxious about whether there would be problems with a child king, but they remembered Edward III as a hero.

Activity

As you discovered on pages 50–51, Edward III is seen as a very successful king. Some historians say he was the greatest king in the Middle Ages. Why was Edward III such a good king? And just how successful was he?

- 1 Read the story of Edward III on pages 52–53. Make a list of the reasons why he was a good king.
- 2 Which of these reasons do you think was the most important in helping him be an effective ruler? Why?