Henry Viii Influences On British Society In The Sixteenth Century Essay, Research Paper

Henry VIII: Influence on British Society in the Sixteenth Century

Final Outline

Henry VIII: British Society in the Sixteenth Century

I. Influence on royal court

A. Titles

B. Serfdoms

C. Taxes

II. Influence on nobles

A. Castles

B. Garrisons

III. Influence on peasants

A. Serfs

B. Taxes

C. Welfare of common people

1. Farmers

2. Workers

IV. Influence on diplomacy

A. France

B. Scotland

C. Ireland

Fifty-six years, six wives, eight children, and a horrible disease that consumed his life. Sound like a horrible ruler to you? Henry VIII was one of the most influential and greatest rulers ever known in Britain, or the world alike. His royal court was the center of attention for all Renaissance culture, and his kingdom prospered and grew, in ways never dreamed of before. He introduced the Protestant religion into Britain, and even forced it with the act of supremacy, which declared the crown as head of church and state. He was educated to become a clergyman, but when all other qualified rulers died in his family, the crown was passed to him. His father, Henry VII, and mother, Elizabeth of York, never intended Henry to be King. Henry reigned from 1509, to his death in 1547.

One of his major accomplishments was his alteration of the royal court. Before Henry VIII, titles were divided on basis of family. Henry changed that to make it so anyone, with enough money, could hold a title in Britain. Titles before Henry VIII were few, and many people were simply commoners, even the rich. Henry first divided the high powered titles of Duke, Prince, and Earl, into a new system, providing more titles and splitting up more land. At the bottom of the list came the Lord title. The title of Lord was more a form of address for a marquis, earl, viscount, baron, or a younger son of a duke, marquis, or bishop. Next was the Baronet. This was a special hereditary rank, above Knight, and below Baron. Baronets were required to pay 1,080 pounds for their privilege. Then came the Baron/Baroness. This was the lowest form of the peerage. This was usually applied to tenants-in-chief, the holders of land granted to them directly by the King. Then the Viscount/Viscountess. This was the rank below earl, and above baron. Originally a viscount was a sheriff of a shire and the Earl’s deputy. The Earl (Count/Countess) was the chief royal representative in the shires. The Marquis/Marchioness was the rank above an earl, and below a duke. It was the Marquis’s job to oversee the shires, and assure the King of the Earl’s work. The highest rank, below the King himself, was the Duke/Duchess. The Duke was the grand overseer of a group of shires. He employed the ranks below him to control the shires. All ranks below reported directly to the Duke/Duchess who reported to the King. The title of King changed with Henry VIII as well. Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon was denied an annulment by the pope. When this was denied, Henry made all loyal subjects swear to the Act of Supremacy. This act declared the King’s crown head of church and state. Henry’s sole purpose in this was to obtain a new wife who might bear him the son he yearned for. Those who chose not to swear to the act were executed.

Another area Henry did away with was Serfdoms. Before Henry VIII, Serfdoms were large and wide spread, and controlled by one Lord. The serfs were horribly oppressed, and no laws were set that would affect those who committed crimes against serfs. Henry created the Manorial Lordship, doing away with the Serfdoms for the most part. A Manorial Lordship was purchased, not given. The title allowed the purchaser, typically a Knight, to a small part of a shire. The people living inside it, were meant only to pay a small tax, and not forced into labor. The Lord then would build a castle, hire tenants-in-chiefs, and run his Manor. Manorial Lordships quickly spread throughout the country, and people became more free, and happier.

Another topic that Henry addressed was taxes. Taxes in Britain at the time were only from those who controlled shires, for they received their taxes from the people under control of them. With the abolition of serfdoms, and the input of Manorial Lordships, the Manorial Lord, and the King took taxes from the serf. Though this may seem to be more taxes, the actual fee given to the Manorial Lord was quite low, and the King less, so as to lessen taxes from the serfdom days. The King also collected tax from the Manorial Lord, and other titled nobles. This fee was dependent on the privileges and land of the title.

With the creation of new titles, mainly those being purchased, rather than being hereditarily transferred, Nobles sprouted out of Britain, at a rate never seen before. Unlike Scotland in this time, the Nobles were relatively peaceful, and got along rather well. One guess as to why this was was that Henry could not stand his own Nobleman acting like savages and fighting with each other. With the implementation of Manorial Lordships, and the abolition of Serfdoms, Nobles were faced with a new problem, who to build their castles? Castle building before Henry was left to serfs, and not paid for at all by the Baron himself. It was expected of the serfs to perform the building for their Lord. With Serfdoms abolished, Nobles had to go in search both in their kingdoms, and throughout Britain, for a skilled architect, as well as dozens of skilled workers, materials, and the hundreds of manual laborers needed to construct the massive castle. From thus forth, the stereotypical stone castle was left mostly to those of vast wealth and title. Most nobles, were not wealthy enough to afford a castle, would build themselves a stone Keep. The Keep was the center building of a castle, inside the outer walls. The nobles did not lose much in the way of land, but they lost the power, and the feeling of security, that the vast, twenty-five foot thick stone walls of the castle provided. Another typical building built by the less wealthy nobles, was the Norman Tower. This building came from a Norman design, hence the name. The tower was taller than wide, typical of most buildings of the time. It had large iron bars, that lowered downward, instead of the usual horizontally mounted wooden gates of the castle. Inside the tower, was a large basement below, which was the center of the building. Above the basement, were many floors, including the typical rooms of the kitchen, armory, bedrooms, and so forth. Most nobles preferred the keep, because it was larger in width than the tower, which was a larger sign of power to them.

Nobles, of course, employed skilled soldiers to watch over their keeps and manors. These were known as garrisons. With the relatively peaceful times of the nobles during Henry’s reign, garrisons were cut down drastically. Before Henry, nobles would often have extensive garrisons of soldiers of fortune. It would include crossbowman and archers, legions of pikeman and swordsman, and the Noble Knights, just for the castle. The largest of manors would well hold two thousand plus soldiers ranging from various militias, to mounted Knights, the very picture of the middle ages. Nobles sliced their garrisons much during Henry’s reign. Keep garrisons would often only consist of a band of crossbowman, a large division of archers, and one to five regiments of pikeman and swordsman. This would depend upon the size of the keep and the region the noble controlled. The more warlike nobles, in northern England, and Scotland, still employed large garrisons, but they were cut down in size. Manor guards were also reduced during Henry’s reign. Nobles usually would have their own militia (armed peasants), ten or so regiments of pikeman and swordsman, cavalry, archers, and the Lord’s knights. While this still may seem a large garrison, the latter garrisons were much more vast, and consisted of a wider variety of troops.

Peasants were another group strongly influenced by Henry. Before Henry, peasants were all those who did not hold title, but were not serfs. Henry changed all that. With the abolition of Serfdoms, the peasants became vaster, now being judged on money and title, instead of title alone. Their manorial lord gave serfs the title of peasant. They still performed many of their same tasks, but were now paid for their work, rather than forced. The manorial lord would pay his peasants land, crops, and money in exchange for work. While they were no longer forced to do they work, they were still not paid much but it was a step in the right direction. Peasants now were more respected, able to gain larger title, and did not have to live in fear of their Baron throwing them off his lands and becoming homeless. Taxes were a new concept of the new peasants. They had not paid them before under their Serfdoms. With the institution of Manorial Lordships, and abolition of Serfdoms, the now freed serfs would have to pay taxes, as did all peasants. The taxes from serfs were collected directly by the Manorial Lords’ tax collectors, and distributed to a separate fund for peasant taxes. The taxes for serfs were very low, consisting of around .05% of their annual income. However, when one considers the average cost of living is fifty gold pieces a year and you make only fifty-five or so a year, it can be a lot! Taxes collected from the peasants by the Manorial Lord were usually not needed. Payment from various lands and titleholders was more than enough to pay for the upkeep of the manor and taxes to the King. The Lords continued to take the taxes anyway, and used them on items for themselves and their families.

The welfare of the common person was also an area influenced by Henry VIII. Before Henry, commoners were not treated well, overtaxed, overworked, and their living conditions were not good. Henry changed all that, starting with the abolition of Serfdoms, and continuing with farmers, and workers. Farmers before Henry were forced to keep a tally of all their crops raised, and send a portion of them off to the owner of their lands. This usually was a large amount of their crops, and it was hard for the farmers to pay it, and still earn gold and feed their families at the same time. Henry made it so farmers did not have to keep track of their crops, and kept all that they raised. This was a very good move by Henry, and it resulted in the growth of population, gold, and the happiness of the people. Workers were another group treated unfairly, until Henry changed that. Before Henry, workers worked to their max, dawn to dusk, and were paid very little, most of which went to taxes. Henry forced the people, who hired workers, to pay them more and lessen the taxes upon the workers. The workers were now able to afford the common cost of living, earn a little bit extra, and still pay their tax fine. This made the workers very happy, and thus they worked harder, quicker, and more efficiently than ever before. Manorial Lords were also happier because despite their loss in profits, their people were happier, less taxed, and better workers, which he could say was a direct result of him, which it was not, and gain even more favor with the people. The upgrading of farmer and worker lifestyle by Henry VIII was a very good move, and it saw a new age of Renaissance culture in Britain, with happier and richer people.

Diplomacy was another subject greatly touched by Henry VIII. The main targets for Henry were France, Scotland, and Ireland. The relations with these countries were for the most part, improved by Henry. In Henry’s time, the memories of the Wars of the Roses were still fresh. The Wars of the Roses were a series of English civil wars between the noble houses of York and London. The name came from the different color roses of the houses, white for London, red for York. No on in England wanted another civil war and neither did Henry. One of the reasons for the Wars of the Roses was France. With a long and vacillating history of diplomacy with France, the two noble houses opposed each other on what decision to make on France. York wished to invade France, and go to war, and London wished to remain neutral, and go to peace talks. On this topic the houses feuded, and eventually took arms against each other, with London finally securing the victory, and re-uniting Britain. Henry took a new approach to diplomacy with France, he had none. He let the French come to him, and they did. French nobles and rulers alike came and had talks with Henry, and there was peace between the nations, for the first time in a very long era. In all the years of Henry’s rule, there were no wars or discontent in a major way between the two nations, a great accomplishment for both the parties involved. Scotland was also of interest to Henry, with its hostile nobles, warring clans, and un-chivalrist, un-technological Highlanders. To England, Scotland was an antediluvian nation that would benefit from British rule. Henry believed this, but left Scotland to be ruled by itself. Some were against Henry’s decisions, but noble and peasant alike, none wished another British and Scottish conflict. So Henry left the Scots to themselves, and there was relative peace between the two nations. The Scots did well on their own, yet some believed they would do better under British rule, including Henry himself, but none would challenge Henry’s authority, and wage a war over the control of the Scots. Ireland was a whole other topic of discussion for Henry. Ireland had long been under uncivil British rule. They were oppressed, suffered, and treated as if they were a group of dairy cows. Henry did not wish to give the Irish back their own rule, and done not want to be as horribly oppressive as other rulers were. He allowed them free reign of their military, taking away the restraints on Ireland and their right to defend themselves. He allowed persons of wealth to hold title and land in Ireland, and loosened the taxes the Irish had to pay to Britain. The Irish were very happy with this, and for the most part it worked out for the better for England as well. Henry VIII was very good with diplomacy, and England saw itself prosper from it vastly.

Henry VIII was one of the most influential and powerful rulers in all Britain’s history. While in his later years, Henry was a bit insane due to his severe case of Diabetes, his country prospered and flourished like never before. People were happy, nobles were rich, the Irish and Scottish were not rudely oppressed, and the French did not have an enemy any longer. The country of Britain saw great rise and expansion in Henry’s reign, including social, economical, political, and all other areas as well. Henry’s reign was a great one and the country flourished from it. Works Cited

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