Henry VIII and Travel

Dr Glenn Richardson
Senior Lecturer in History
St Mary's University College London

From thence the whole Court removed to Windsor [the king] then beginning his progress, exercising himself daily in shooting, singing, dancing, wrestling, casting of the bar, playing at the recorders, flute, virginals, and in setting of songs, making of ballads & did set two goodly masses… And when he came to Woking, there were kept both jousts and tourneys: the rest of this progress was spent in hunting, hawking and shooting…The said progress finished, his grace, the Queen with all their whole train, in the month of October following, removed to Greenwich.

So Edward Hall described Henry VIII's travels in the summer of 1510. He captures not only Henry's way of travelling as a young king, but his style of monarchy as well. Henry usually travelled to hunt, to get to know his kingdom better and to show himself off to his own people and to foreigners alike as a magnanimous and accomplished prince. That is how it was for most years of Henry's reign. As he got older he travelled less and over shorter distances but the king and his court remained itinerant, in the medieval tradition of monarchs, until virtually the last year of his life. Although he did a good deal of travelling within England, Henry was still the least well- travelled of the major European monarchs of his day. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Suleyman, the Sultan of the Ottoman Turks and Francis I, the King of France all travelled much longer distances and more frequently within and beyond their domains than Henry did his.

Henry travelled as much from necessity as for pleasure and was, for much of his reign, a London 'commuter'. A devastating fire in 1512 left the king with no royal palace in Westminster, the religious, judicial and legislative capital of the kingdom. So for twenty years thereafter, Henry's principal residence was the palace at Greenwich - the place of his birth in June 1491. This required the king to travel by barge up the Thames to Westminster when his presence there was required. More frequently, he received high-ranking servants (including Cardinal Wolsey) and entertained ambassadors at Greenwich. To the west of the capital was Richmond palace to which Henry also frequently travelled and at which he often entertained, especially at Christmas. In the 1520s he was so frequently a guest at Wolsey's country residence, Hampton Court, that in 1526 the cardinal included it in a list of the king's 'greater houses'. So it duly became when Wolsey fell from power in 1529, together with the cardinal's Westminster residence, York Place. This was progressively transformed into the king's principal metropolitan residence Whitehall Palace.

Beyond his immediate London 'commuting' range, Henry also travelled for business and pleasure in what is now the greater London area, in Essex and in the Thames Valley, having at his disposal over forty larger and smaller residences, most acquired in the decade after 1530. Some of this travelling was done as part of his summer progresses but the king also travelled more than might be imagined in the winter. During the colder months the court was at its largest. Housing, feeding and entertaining more than 1000 people at a time was demanding on even the biggest of Henry's 'greater' houses. Requirements of hygiene and the pressure which the court could put on the resources of local towns and villages meant that the king changed houses relatively frequently. Except in extreme years, the Thames remained navigable during the winter allowing Henry still to travel between his larger houses in comfort and perhaps to escape the boredom of the winter by changes of scenery.

Henry also travelled at times in order to get *away* from his court, with its throng of ambitious courtiers and formality, to one of the smaller houses such as The More or Langley where he could have 'pastime' in more relaxed surroundings with just a few friends. He would also flee from the court at any sign of disease. In 1517 the king cancelled a planned late-summer progress because of an outbreak of the virulent 'sweating sickness' which continued until the following winter so that, as Hall reports, 'the king kept himself ever with a small company and kept no solemn Christmas, willing to have no resort for fear of infection. In the summer of 1528 he did the same thing, moving from house to house, anxious to escape another outbreak to which Anne Boleyn briefly succumbed.

On quite a number of occasions the king travelled as the nation's commander-in-chief. Hall describes how in 1512, 'the King ever desiring to see his navy together, road to Portsmouth, and there he appointed captains for *The Regent',* a ship that was shortly afterwards lost in action against the French off Brest. Twice Henry went to war against France. Accompanied by a smaller 'military' household but leading a vast royal army, the king first attacked France in June 1513 and did enough to make his name as a warrior internationally. He entered Tournai as its conqueror and was entertained by his Habsburg allies at Lille, then in Imperial territory. Just over thirty years later, in 1544, he captured the coastal city of Boulogne after a relatively quick siege. In 1514, 1523, 1525, 1539, and in 1543, his summer movements were dominated by military and defensive preparations such as inspecting musters and overseeing the building of fortifications or naval preparedness. In 1545 he travelled to Portsea on the south coast to oversee defensive operations against an invading French fleet, witnessing the loss of the *Mary Rose* in the Solent that July.

The king also travelled to meet other princes in more peaceful times. The largest and most spectacular progress of his reign was in 1520 when he travelled to Guînes on the border of the Pale of Calais and France, there to meet Francis I for the Field of Cloth of Gold. He took with him not just the royal household and its hangers-on, but virtually the entire English nobility and a sizeable proportion of its prominent gentry in an operation second only to war in complexity of its organisation. Henry and Francis I personally affirmed a peace treaty agreed between them in 1518 with two weeks of para-military combats and feasting, during which he was several times entertained in the French city of Ardres. Henry met Francis a second time at Calais and Boulogne in the autumn of 1532 in a scaled-down, slightly middle-aged, version of the Field of Cloth of Gold. In the summer of 1522 Henry entertained his nephew the emperor Charles V who made a stop-over in England en route from the Netherlands to Spain. The two sovereigns spent several weeks together as Henry escorted his guest through Surrey and Hampshire to Southampton from where the imperial fleet sailed for Santander.

In 1541 the king made the longest journey of his life, to York, to meet James V of Scotland. Cutting a swathe through the local wildlife as he went, the king arrived in York in September only to discover that James had better things to do than meet his English uncle. Henry's fury at this humiliation was not assuaged by discovering shortly after he got back to London that his fifth wife, Catherine Howard, had amused herself on the journey by committing adultery with one of his courtiers and at least intending the same thing with another. Not long afterwards, the queen made a short, one-way, trip to Tower Green from where she was launched into eternity.

The demands of war and diplomacy aside, the majority of Henry's summers were spent on formal progress in England, meeting and greeting the landed gentry. The king's itinerary would be published in advance as would the names of those listed to accompany him. In contrast to his daughter Elizabeth when she was queen, Henry moved fairly frequently during the progress, usually staying for only a few days at a time at any one location. Part of a surviving 'giest' or itinerary, for the summer of 1526 shows Henry's itinerary for a progress through Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. One of the longest and most politically significant of Henry's progresses was that of 1535 when he journeyed into the West Country to promote and oversee the implementation of religious reform there. Starting from Windsor, the royal party moved to Reading and from there through Oxfordshire to Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire. They visited another six locations in that county in late August and early September before travelling down through Wiltshire and Hampshire to Southampton, stopping at Winchester en route. In October, after a stay in Portsmouth, Henry headed back towards London through

Hampshire staying at Bishop's Waltham, Old Arlesford and at The Vyne, the home of Lord Sandys, the sheriff of Hampshire, Constable of Southampton Castle and a long time favourite of the king.

During the progress months, outside the legal terms of the year, the routine of central government lay dormant. As Hall reports of the year 1526, 'all this summer the king took his pastime in hunting and nothing happened worthy to be written of'. But this is slightly deceptive. His account of 1515 gives a better sense of how 'political' progresses in fact were:

This summer the king took his progress Westward & visited his towns, castles there & heard the complaints of his poor commonality & ever as he rode, he hunted & liberally departed with venison; & in the middle of September he came to his manor of (W)oking & thether came to him the Archbishop of York whom he heartily welcomed and showed him great pleasures.

Wherever the king was, so was the court - the forum for the kind of intense 'personal politics' of access and influence with the sovereign that so characterised the reign of Henry VIII. Cardinal Wolsey and, after him, Cromwell, together with a 'remnant' of the royal Council, did not usually travel with the king but kept routine administration ticking over in his absence and were on hand at his return to implement the myriad of decisions and promises Henry had made while on progress.

Progresses were most obviously political events when they gave the local dignitaries and officials in the counties an opportunity to show their loyalty to the regime formally. When the king entered a town or city he would be greeted by the mayor and other civic and ecclesiastical dignitaries. The royal party might also be greeted with pageants praising the king and the Tudor regime and signifying the local importance and loyalty of the municipality which the king was entering. On a more personal level, the prospect of an encounter with the king and his close courtiers and officials was an enticing one for any local civic dignitary or county gentleman. He would have the opportunity to make personal suits or complaints to the king and to receive from him not just gifts of venison and the like but perhaps redress of some long-running legal or property dispute, or some lucrative local post in royal service with which to enhance his own income and his local reputation as a political heavyweight. Wives, children and other relatives might be thrust forward in the hope of preferment and his family and friends would hopefully bask in the reflected glory of the king before envious neighbours and local rivals.

For a nobleman or gentleman of the upper echelons the further prospect of not merely meeting, but hosting, the king and his court was a great privilege but also a considerable responsibility often entailing great expense. At Iron Acton in Gloucestershire, Sir Nicholas Poyntz built an entire new range on to his manor house, Acton Court, to accommodate the king and Queen Anne when they visited in 1535. It was decorated in the latest Italianate style and Poyntz brought new plate, porcelain, Venetian glass and other costly items with which to impress the king with his relative wealth and sophistication. At Sutton Place near Guildford in Surrey, Sir Richard Weston completed, or nearly completed, an entire house in a pioneering Renaissance style in time for Henry's stay there in 1533.

Whenever and wherever Henry moved it was a major logistical operation. Royal officers were sent out beforehand to arrange accommodation and provisions for the entourage which followed. The king often stayed in large private houses and, until the mid 1530s, at monastic houses. Local inns and other private houses in the area were used to accommodate the members of his outer entourage. Each of the king's own houses had a Keeper responsible for its general maintenance and for preparing it for his arrival; the palaces had several keepers. Many royal properties had a skeleton staff and basic furniture and equipment but most of the king's and queen's personal possessions, including plate, beds, furnishings, cushions, tapestries and hangings and their clothes travelled with them under the responsibility of a number of household departments, chiefly the Wardrobes of the Robes and Beds. The royal party would ride on ahead or go by barge to the next location on the itinerary leaving the officers of these departments to dismantle specially designed portable beds and other furniture, to roll tapestries and hangings and carefully transport this 'household stuff' as it was described, by cart, sumpter mule or boat. The royal luggage was specially made, with coffers, chests, leather and canvas bags and packing cases. Then as now, up-market travel gear was expensive. One coffer made for Kateryn Parr's linen was elaborately lined and decorated and cost £4 18s. 2d. Compare this with the annual salary of a yeoman of the wardrobe in 1526 at only £5 17s. 4d. Many such items had elaborate locks and were sealed in transit. Items could also be sent from or returned to larger repositories in the metropolitan palaces.

From his first days as king Henry VIII knew the value of seeing his kingdom personally. He also knew the value of being seen by his subjects, at all social levels. He maintained a tradition of peripatetic monarchy that stretched back centuries and brought a renewed glamour and ostentation to this aspect of monarchy, as to every other. Only towards the end of his life did the consequences of his morbid obesity more or less confine him to the metropolitan houses and finally to Whitehall. Even then the king's interest in the geography of his lands was

undiminished and is attested to by the many maps and charts he kept in his private library at the palace. His own journeys were mostly confined to the south and east of England where he was politically and personally most comfortable. He travelled less than his father Henry VII had and less elaborately than would his daughter Elizabeth. Nevertheless, whether he travelled on hunting trips, or in order to move between Thames Valley houses in the winter or on formal summer progresses, Henry VIII's travels were, in themselves, impressive demonstrations of his royal personality and his power.