



New Perspectives on Henry VIII's Royal Progresses

Anthony Musson

HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

DOI: 10.21039/rsj.564

Abstract: The Introduction to this Special Issue highlights how Henry VIII's progresses deserve renewed attention. It reveals the specific topics and themes that the interdisciplinary group of scholars connected with the project *Henry VIII on Tour: Landscapes, Communities, and Performance* (2022-2026) will be discussing in their articles and shows how new perspectives on the nature and significance of the king's journeys around his kingdom have been garnered.



The essays in this issue stem from research carried out for the AHRC-funded project Henry VIII on Tour: Landscapes, Communities and Performance, which brings new perspectives on the reign of the eponymous king and his successive queens through the lens of his royal progresses.¹

The nature and significance of extended royal journeys away from the London-based royal palaces to various parts of the kingdom is a comparatively under-researched and less well-understood subject in relation to Henry VIII's reign, than to those of his daughter or the first Stuart king. Studies of the better archivally resourced journeys of Elizabeth I and James I have highlighted these rulers' distinctive use of royal progresses as tools of patronage and propaganda (as well as signalling their own agency and manoeuvrability).² This has engendered certain hypotheses and assumptions about their predecessor's journeys and the practice of personal monarchy in the early sixteenth century. While not entirely without foundation, it has nevertheless underestimated the extent to which Henry VIII's progresses were undertaken in very different circumstances and contexts.

As John Cooper points out in his examination of the historiography of royal mobility, it is equally important to set Henry's progresses within an international context, for royal itinerance was a traditional feature of other European monarchies and not a phenomenon confined to the kings of England. Comparisons with France, for example, and notably with the impulsive François I, reveal Henry's imitation of French royal style and protocols, but also the very different geographies and realities of progress for each monarch.³ While François was almost perpetually on progress through his territories and his entourage could number as many as 12,000 people, Henry's journeys had a more defined chronology and geographical delineation and his accompanying train only exceptionally (as in 1541) reached as many as 4,000. Both kings seem to have enjoyed moments of spontaneity and used prolonged hunting trips to escape the public gaze, but the considerably smaller scale of operations on the English side allowed for greater flexibility and for Henry increasingly to withdraw to the privacy of his own estates as the reign

¹ Led by Historic Royal Palaces, with the Universities of York and Newcastle. See *Henry on Tour: The Progresses of Henry VIII*, accessed 30 January 2026, www.henryontour.uk.

² Cole, *The Portable Queen*; Neighbors, "Elizabeth I, Huntress of England"; Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions and Magnificent Festivities*; Cole, "The State Apartment"; Ellis, "The Progresses of James VI & I."

³ Richardson, *Francis I*; Bove, Salamagne, and zum Kolk, *L'itinérance de la cour*; Faisant, "The French Kings on the Road."

continued and only embark on more extrovert journeys at key and politically motivated moments.

In considering what constituted a royal progress and how to reach a working definition for Henry's, Keely Hayes-Davies examines the exercise of power in the localities and exposes to what extent progresses assume pragmatic implications. In this issue, she indeed argues that the primary aim of the long-ranging 1535 progress was not to impose an agenda on the local populace or impress the Reformation on them. It did, however, provide an opportunity for rewarding the new group of ambitious courtiers who had supported him in the recent religious changes, as well as enabled Thomas Cromwell and his cadre of General Surveyors to assess the monastic houses the court visited. Surprisingly, this progress also had diplomatic overtones as Henry decided to review defence and security measures. In doing so, he was demonstrating how the king could also use his progress to personally intervene in matters of immediate concern to the realm, and thus exercise one of the prime responsibilities of kingship.

The timing of progresses and their alignment with the liturgical calendar is evaluated by Magnus Williamson in a longitudinal survey of feast days and their corresponding ritual demands and court dietary patterns, from the early thirteenth century up to the mid-sixteenth century. His analysis indicates how expectations of kingship worked in practice and how certain observances were embedded in the organisational memory. Yet he also shows how changes in fashion and scale over time caused some practices to dwindle to extinction, such as those relating to particular cults or the holding of large communal feasts for all-comers. Henry VIII initially carried on his predecessors' traditions of exhibiting monarchical piety as well as an adherence to certain festal liturgies while on progress. His public visibility (through civic entries, shrine offerings, and in celebrating Sundays in religious centres), while strong at the start of the reign (notably 1510–1511), then fluctuated, with a marked preference for private gatherings in his own residencies from the late 1520s, before relaunching a more public phase when on progress in 1535 and 1541.

The queen frequently accompanied her husband on royal progresses, but the absence of one or the other could be telling. The queen's non-attendance was usually owing to her pregnancy, safeguarding her health, though even when she was with Henry on progress, their paths occasionally diverged or she remained ensconced at a venue while he went on, rejoining him on his return. Kirsty Wright reminds us that on several occasions when Henry VIII was absent from the realm, he entrusted the governance of the kingdom

not to a leading member of the nobility, nor to a senior administrative figure, but to his trusted wife and queen. Formally appointed as queens regent, both Katherine of Aragon and Katherine Parr exercised monarchical authority while the king was abroad on military campaign against the French, respectively in 1513 and 1544. These were unusual appointments and statements in themselves at this period, prefiguring half a century of queens regnant. They reveal new facets of queenship. Both Katherines faced considerable challenges including attack from the Scots in 1513 and a complicated religious and political climate in 1544 and both women rose to the task. Considering the Issue's theme of progresses, their tenures also reveal how they conducted their own journeys in the king's absence: a visible projection of their authority, a display of continuity, legitimacy, and royal mobility. These "kingless progresses" had different itineraries, purposes, and scope. Yet, they underline some of the tools and strengths of personal monarchy, as well as the problems that being "on the road" presented in terms of provisioning, communications, and access to government documents.

The prime focus of the other papers in this collection, however, is not so much the politics of progress as the social and cultural implications of royal journeys. These are explored from liturgical, architectural, musical, and logistical angles, and with regard to the historical, aesthetical, and material culture of art and textile furnishings, as well as the magnificence of royal image displayed through interior and exterior design. The latter is particularly sensible at progress venues he acquired and renovated such as Newhall (later known as the Beaulieu), Petworth, and St Mary's Abbey, York.

Favoured tapestries usually travelled with the king on progress; packed in special coffers they could be removed, re-used, and recycled in particular houses as the location or occasion demanded. Louise Hampson examines the role of tapestries in Henry's image projection and how their location, visibility, and imagery was managed or choreographed at different venues while on progress. Focussing on those acquired specifically for Newhall (Beaulieu Palace), she highlights the elaborate instructions given for their purchase and the costly nature of such textiles. Henry himself was not only an obsessive collector, but also led the way in terms of ensuring that the Crown was the recipient of the highest quality of workmanship. Such extravagant expenditure was deemed worthwhile, partly for its own practical and cultural benefit (comfort and aesthetics), but also for the political message inherent in the imagery and to achieve recognition as a Renaissance prince-connoisseur, by having his collection observed by diplomats and commented upon in wider European circles for its costliness and splendour.

Detailed accounts of the architectural work carried out at the royal residences chosen to host the king on progress indicate the new styles, materials, and building schemes Henry embraced. As Kate Giles argues, acquisition of the former Percy honour of Petworth in 1535 saw Henry undertake a substantial rebuilding programme a year later, probably with his new queen Jane Seymour in mind, establishing it as one of a new spate of southern England residences with good hunting prospects, that were adapted to meet shifting royal accommodation needs and became regular venues on his progress routes in the late 1530s and 1540s. Refurbishment, however, was often carried out at speed, using semi-permanent materials that decayed more quickly, making detection of their location or alignment in the intervening centuries more difficult. Progresses also offered an opportunity for courtiers to demonstrate their own wealth and architectural prowess by adding new wings designed to accommodate the royal party to their existing houses (as occurred at Acton Court in Gloucestershire in 1535), or to exhibit (post-Dissolution) their acquisition and reconfiguration of former monastic properties into luxury accommodation suitable for royal visits. Close examination of surviving buildings and records enable the spatial configurations and decorative schemes of these buildings to be reconstructed.

Casting fresh light on the workings of the royal household in its detailed preparations for progress and what happened "on the road" whilst the king and his entourage were underway, Anthony Musson unveils the logistical challenges posed and the disruptive elements that threatened to derail operations. With these in mind, he adopts a special focus on the myriads of people (at all levels and in all departments) who were responsible for keeping "the show" going and offers valuable insights into how the lengthy periods of travelling and accommodation were accomplished. Analysing the complex interplay between those choreographing the progress and those performing in it, he shows how these vital cogs in the royal machine were invariably equal to the task, yet faced a tension between the predictability and continuity they needed to make royal progresses happen, and their inability to fully anticipate the king's actions or control his environment.

An important department that travelled with the king and queen to fulfil royal religious requirements was staffed by the Dean, Chaplains, Gentlemen and Children of the Chapel Royal. Kerry McCarthy examines the role and nature of the itinerant Chapel Royal, particularly the combination of singers and type of music suitable for maintaining the correct level of ceremonial and liturgical performance while the king was on tour. The Eltham Ordinances of 1526 dictated how the "riding chapel" was constituted, prescribed the number of liturgical services they sang each day, and restricted the amount of luggage

they could carry.⁴ In light of these strictures, McCarthy highlights the everyday realities and logistical problems that affected these highly professional royal musicians and how the regulations were themselves increasingly amended or ignored. Among the essential baggage carried with the royal train was thus the paraphernalia of the Chapel Royal, which included not just the portable altars and priestly vestments, but the all-important service books (antiphoners and processions) and the choirbooks or partbooks from which the complex sacred music characterising the pre-Reformation period was performed, some of it even written by Henry VIII while on progress. In addition to payment of expenses incurred, the main concerns of the Chapel singers seem to have been the provision of fast horses (in case the king suddenly deviated from his published route) and where they could find lodgings locally, when not accommodated in progress residences.

Successful progresses required engaging and negotiating with civic, ecclesiastical, monastic, noble, and gentry communities and forging social and commercial relationships for billeting and provision of venues within the localities along the proposed royal route. Integration of royal household staff with those of their majesties' hosts was probably not without some friction and occasions where overlap was necessary (as when musicians from the Chapel Royal and St George's Chapel, Windsor joined together). It could even be an opportunity for the playing out of personal vendettas. Similarly, the king's attitude towards the localities he was being hosted by could itself be interventionist, controlling, and overbearing depending upon the context, but especially on the northern progress of 1541.

Study of Henry's progresses enables us to gauge something of his character and personality, his desires, demands, and abilities (from connoisseur to composer) as well as his dislikes, fears, and moods. In 1535, for example, he was notably "merry" when on tour with Anne Boleyn. The mixture of control and unpredictability that characterises the progresses reflects Henry's mercurial nature and a determination to pursue his own agenda. They also reveal the autonomy and agency of his queens, several of whom undertook progresses separately from Henry, their mobility and authority going unquestioned. They also allow us to observe and marvel at the considerable amount of planning and organisation that went on behind the scenes, enabling a better appreciation of the unsung, hidden cast members with whom previous scholarship on progresses has not engaged extensively.

⁴ Nichols, *A Collection*, 160–161 (cap. 77–78).

The magnificence and theatricality of the royal court on progress, however, belies the huge expenditure that was incurred. Not only did the Crown have to pay in advance or reimburse its own purveyors and surveyors, but contracts with farmers, artisans, tailors, and other producers had to be honoured, the services of labourers, carters, blacksmiths, singers and messengers (among others) suitably rewarded. Hosts themselves incurred costs in building works and refurbishment, in contributing to the provisioning and in ensuring there was sufficient game stocked for hunting, entertainment from musicians and players and appropriate gifts garnered for the royal party. There was considerable competition as well as collaboration between progress hosts. Whilst it might bring benefits in terms of peer esteem and pleasing the king, showcasing newly built houses and attractive hunting estates may well have backfired by encouraging Henry in his desire to exchange and acquire such sites for his ever-expanding royal property portfolio.

The unpredictability of royal progresses in terms of the knock-on effects of changes of route and location presented very real challenges for both the royal household and the various regional locations where careful plans had already been laid. The resulting economic burdens and loss of reputation were significant corollaries of the unfortunate combinations of freaks of nature, accident, and royal whim. Equally, the harsh reality of progresses was that members of the royal household were injured, fell ill, or even died on these journeys, whether as a result of contracting the plague, falling off a horse, or drowning during a storm. The king's heightened concern about illness often changed the planned itinerary to the detriment of all concerned. The very real threat of plague in Bristol in 1535, for example, prevented Henry's visit to the city and resulted in cancellation of the civic welcome organised for him.

A very different side to royal progresses is also apparent from the salutary revelations of the 1547 inventory of Henry VIII's properties and possessions, in which the fates of once splendid former progress venues are recorded: furnishings worn out, furniture broken or damaged, and the houses themselves in need of repair.⁵ Indeed, telling the fascinating stories of provincial progresses is hindered or made more difficult by the lamentable state of many of the venues that Henry VIII perennially visited, a considerable proportion of which are no longer extant, let alone visibly Tudor; likewise, many monasteries in which he was once a guest were demolished completely or now lie in ruins. They still nevertheless present intriguing puzzles for architects, archaeologists, and

⁵ Starkey, Hayward, and Ward, *The Inventory of Henry VIII*.

historians alike, as recounted here. Together with surviving art, music, material objects, and documentary sources in the archives (albeit scattered and incomplete themselves), they offer a broad basis on which to reconstruct the expectations and experiences of Henry VIII’s progresses.

The articles in this issue showcase the fruits of fresh archival study and the bringing together of disparate sources underpinned by interdisciplinary scholarship in order to provide a new series of insights into the worlds inhabited by a diverse multitude of hitherto neglected Tudor actors. These worlds are captured visually in some of the other outputs of the project, notably the interactive maps of key progress routes (1511, 1522, 1535, and 1541) as well as the digital visualisations of progress as experienced at the bishop of Lincoln’s palace at Lyddington (Rutland) and Henry VIII’s newly reconfigured palace in his manor of St Mary’s Abbey (York) in 1541.⁶ They also complement and anticipate the scholarship exhibited in a forthcoming monograph on the subject which will provide a fuller evaluation of many of the significant themes aired here and an elaboration of the approaches and methodologies used in analysing them and in producing the digital outputs embedded in the project.

⁶ Available on the project website. See footnote 1.

Bibliography

- Bove, Boris, Alain Salamagne, and Caroline zum Kolk, eds. *L'itinérance de la cour en France et en Europe. Moyen Âge-XIX^e siècle*. Septentrion Presses Universitaires, 2021.
- Cole, Emily. "The State Apartment of the Jacobean Country House 16033-1625." DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 2010.
- Cole, Mary Hill. *The Portable Queen. Elizabeth I and the Politics of Ceremony*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- Ellis, Joseph James. "The Progresses of James VI & I, c. 1580-1625: Authority, Multiple-Monarchy and Gendered Representation on the Road." PhD thesis, University of York, 2024.
- Faisant, Étienne. "The French Kings on the Road: The Court's Journeys in Renaissance France." In *Royal Journeys in Early Modern Europe: Progresses, Palaces and Panache*, edited by Anthony Musson and J. P. D. Cooper. Routledge, 2022.
- Neighbors, Dustin. "Elizabeth I, Huntress of England: Private Politics, Diplomacy, and Courtly Relations Cultivated through Hunting." *The Court Historian* 28, no. 1 (2023): 49-79.
- Nichols, J. B., ed. *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household*. Society of Antiquaries, 1790.
- Nichols, John. *The Progresses, Processions and Magnificent Festivities, of King James the First, His Royal Consort, Family, and Court*. 4 vols. J. B. Nichols, 1828.
- Richardson, Glenn. *Francis I: The Knight King*. Reaktion, 2025.
- Starkey, David, Maria Hayward, and Philip Ward, eds. *The Inventory of Henry VIII*. 3 vols. Brepols, 1998-2026.