

Only surviving saintly depiction of Henry VI secured for the future

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The British Museum has acquired a one-of-a-kind figure of King Henry VI of England with National Heritage Memorial Fund support.

Image



Figure of King Henry VI. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

This tiny gold figure is the only remaining depiction of Henry VI to explicitly represent the monarch as a saint. The figurine was found by a metal detectorist near Market Harborough in 2017 and is thought to have been originally attached to a much larger object that was likely destroyed in the 16th century.

The acquisition, made under the Treasure Act 1996 was made possible by a £60,000 grant from the Memorial Fund alongside donations from the Ruddock Foundation for the Arts, and Mrs Pierrette Bergin in memory of J.A. and P.M. Bergin.

Who was Henry VI?

Henry VI was the last Lancastrian monarch. He ruled between 1422-61 and again in 1470-71 and was likely murdered on the order of Edward of York. The existence of this figure was probably part of the campaign to have him canonised – the letters SH (Saint Henry) are pre-emptively enamelled on the corbel beneath his feet.

Some who prayed to the dead king reported experiencing miracles and the Pope was asked to canonise Henry. His body was moved from Chertsey to Windsor and a shrine was built in St George's Chapel there, but Henry was never made a saint.

When King Henry VIII ended the veneration of saints in England in the 16th century, huge volumes of precious early Tudor and medieval metalwork were destroyed and their components repurposed. This action saw Henry VI's shrine dismantled and many precious objects broken up.

Image



The intricate figure is less than 4cm tall. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Enormous historical significance

The quality of the object suggests it was made for a patron of high status. With the figure's future secured, the British Museum will now carry out research into who made it and where it originally came from.

Simon Thurley, Chair of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "This is a truly exceptional object from a fascinating period of English history. It combines enormous historical significance with wonderful craftsmanship and great beauty. It can now be appreciated by visitors to the British Museum and through

digitisation online.

“The Memorial Fund exists to save the UK's finest heritage and create a timeless collection that belongs to us all, as a permanent memorial to those have given their lives for the UK. We are delighted that this figure of King Henry VI as a saint is now part of that growing collection.”

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