



THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

The reign of Charles I. James I died in 1625 and was succeeded by his son Charles I (1625-1649). During his reign the dissensions existing between the Crown and Parliament became increasingly worse. Wrongly advised by his father's favourite, the Duke of Buckingham (George Villiers, 1592-1628), Charles I undertook a petty war with Spain. An attack on the port of Cadiz in 1625 revealed a complete failure and an expedition against France to help the Huguenots in their stronghold of La Rochelle proved equally disastrous. The cost of the war compelled the king to ask Parliament for money. Parliament, summoned twice, rejected Charles' requests and impeached the Duke of Buckingham as responsible for mismanagement. Parliament met a third time in 1628 and put forward the Petition of Rights, a document limiting royal prerogatives and demanding the abolition of the most frequent abuses, such as the imposition of taxes without parliamentary consent and the exercise of justice outside the limits of the Common Law. It also demanded the abolition of the army in time of peace. Charles was compelled to accept the Petition in return of subsidies.

Meanwhile the Duke of Buckingham was murdered by a fanatic Puritan. Shortly afterwards the king dissolved the Parliament and governed without it for eleven years (1629-1640): this period is known as the Eleven Years' Tyranny. During this period Charles imposed the martial law and the army was controlled by his chief-minister, the Earl of Strafford (Thomas Wentworth, 1593-1641).

Parliamentary taxes were replaced by old taxes such as the Ship Money, which could be levied without the consent of Parliament. The Court of Star Chamber (founded by Henry VII) and the Court of High Commission (founded by Elizabeth I) were largely used as instruments of despotism. The King's best ally was the Church, under the leadership of William Laud (1573-1645), Archbishop of Canterbury and a stern upholder of the Divine Right of kings.

The first opposition to the king's absolutism came from Scotland in 1638, as a reaction against Laud's measure to impose conformity of religious worship on Scottish Presbyterianism. A National Covenant was drawn up and signed by all classes of the people.

Charles, in need of money to crush the Scottish rebellion by force, resolved to summon Parliament. In 1640 it met twice: the first session, known as Short Parliament, accepted the king's request on condition that the most despotic measures should be redressed; a second session, remembered as the Long Parliament as it was not dissolved till 1653, proceeded to the impeachment of Laud and the Earl of Strafford. Pressed by every side and under the threat of a violent mob, Charles was compelled to sign Strafford's condemnation to death, while Laud was thrown into the Tower. Then Parliament passed a series of Acts, among which was the Triennial Act (1641), establishing that Parliament was to meet every three years even without the king's consent. The Court of Star Chamber and the Court of High Commission were abolished and a certain number of taxes were declared illegal. The House of Commons, which had become more powerful than the House of Lords, issued the Great Remonstrance (1641) condemning the king's tyranny and asking for a radical reform of the Church.

At this point the House divided: a large part of the components fearing that things had gone too far, were now disposed to turn on the king's side. But Charles was unable to exploit the situation to his own advantage. He rushed, with an escort of noblemen, to the House to secure the arrest of the most authoritative leaders of the opposition. This infringement of the ancient privileges of Parliament increased the hostility around Charles and created a definite split between the Crown and Parliament.

The Civil War and Oliver Cromwell. Charles retired to York, while the country was divided into two factions both engaged in gathering their forces. The king's supporters, called Cavaliers, included the majority of the nobility and the landowners of the northern and western shires, the poorest and backward areas of the country. On the Parliament side was first of all London, followed by the population of the largest towns, and a large part of the country gentry. The Parliament's supporters, nicknamed Roundheads because of their short haircut, were centred in the South and East, the most economically developed parts of the country.

The Civil War (1642-1649) was preceded by local conflicts and the first campaigns were favourable to the king. But Charles' resources did not allow him to go on fighting for a long time, and his only chance consisted in a speedy victory, for he could rely only on the individual generosity of his supporters, contrarily from his adversaries, who had the possibility to raise taxes to finance their war in a regular way. In the long run this proved a decisive advantage.

The extraordinary figure of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), emerged from the ranks of the Roundheads. He became the leader of the army and in 1644 inflicted a heavy defeat upon the royal troops led by Prince Rupert of the Rhine (1619-1682), Charles' nephew, at Marston Moor. As a consequence, the North fell into the hands of the Parliamentarians, and the king's victory at Lostwithiel, in the West, did not produce decisive results.



The following year, Cromwell reorganized his forces: he increased the power of the New Model Army (the army was «remodeled» on a national basis, replacing the old county associations), which not only became a valiant military instrument, but also a strong political party, representing the revolutionary lower middle class. Thanks to Cromwell's reinforcement of the army, Charles' troops were again defeated at Naseby (1645). Fighting went on for another year, but the result was now certain: the king's cause was irretrievably lost.

Charles fled from his headquarters at Oxford to Newcastle, where he surrendered to the Scots. So the first stage of the revolution ended. Negotiations were opened at Newcastle between the king, the Scots and the representatives of the Parliament; but as Charles refused to accept Presbyterianism and the Covenant, the Scots delivered him to his adversaries.

The problem in the rank of Parliament was now to find a means to pacify the country and to restore Charles to the throne, under proper conditions to prevent him from exerting any real power. But Charles refused to accept the heads of the proposal offered to him and to submit to every condition limiting his royal prerogatives. In the three following years he continuously tried to regain his power by exploiting the divisions existing among his opponents. He intrigued to play off the army against the Commons and the Scots. In 1649 a Scottish army came to England to help Charles, but it was defeated by Cromwell at Preston. Then Cromwell, after taking London, expelled from Parliament or arrested all Charles' supporters; those who remained belonged to the most radical Puritan section. This part of Parliament, called the Rump Parliament, voted for the appointment of a High Court of Justice: the Court condemned Charles to death and he was executed.

The Commonwealth. After Charles' execution, England was proclaimed to be a Commonwealth (1649-1660; → Glossary) or Republic, governed according to a written Constitution provided by the Agreement of the People. The document established complete religious toleration, the democratic control of the army, the biennial election of Parliament to appoint an Executive Council.

The Commonwealth Government was soon attacked by Scotland and Ireland which did not agree with the new settlement, and Charles' son was proclaimed king as Charles II at Edinburgh.

The leadership of the army, confronted with the threat of a war, abolished the House of Lords and appointed a Council of State. Cromwell at the head of the army landed in Ireland and succeeded in shattering the Irish forces at Drogheda and Wexford (1649), and the Scottish troops at Dunbar (1650); but the violent methods employed in the war caused deep resentment which was to last for years. Charles II, defeated at Worcester (1651), fled to France.

In 1652 a war broke out against the Dutch, the most dangerous of England's rivals at sea. Cromwell forced the Dutch to come to an agreement (1654). Later on in a successful expedition to the West Indies against the Spanish fleet, England gained the island of Jamaica.

At home, in spite of military successes, the Commonwealth failed to achieve a social and political stability. If the Civil War had destroyed the instruments of «royal tyranny» and had transformed the apparatus of the State, it had left many problems still unsolved.

At Cromwell's sudden death in 1658, his eldest surviving son Richard (1626-1712) succeeded him, but he was unable to govern the country, divided by contrasting interests, and was obliged to resign (1659). After his resignation Parliament called Charles back from his exile in France and was crowned as Charles II (1660-1685). The return of the monarchy is known as The Restoration. The period between the reigns of Charles I and Charles II is also called the Interregnum (1649-1660).

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1625-1649 Reign of Charles I: 1628 → Petition of Rights; 1629-1640 → Charles' rule without Parliament: Eleven Years' Tyranny; 1641 → Triennial Act and Great Remonstrance; 1642 → Oliver Cromwell became the leader of the Parliament's army; 1642-1649 → Civil War (Battles of Marston Moor, Naseby, Preston); 1649 → Execution of Charles I.

1649-1660 The Commonwealth: 1649-1658 → Cromwell's Protectorate; 1658 → Cromwell's death: Richard Cromwell succeeded his father; 1659 → Richard Cromwell's resignation.

1660 The Restoration (Charles II's crowning).

