

The History of Early Modern Britain from 1485-1603

Kings of England

Tudor

Henry VII (1485-1509)
Henry VIII (1509-1547)
Edward VI (1547-1553)
Mary I 'Bloody Mary' (1553-1558)
Elizabeth I (1558-1603)
Sovereigns

Stuart

James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) and I of England (1603-1625)
Charles I (1625-1649), executed
Charles II (1649-1685), reigned 1660-1685
James II (1685-1688), deposed
William III (1689-1702) and Mary II (1689-1694), Joint
Anne (1702-1714)

The Tudor Dynasty

Henry VII presided over a strengthened monarchy which exercised increasingly centralised control over the country. However, he and his successors were dogged by the questionable legitimacy of their dynasty. The problem came to a head in Henry VIII's reign because of his repeated failure to produce a male heir. Henry attempted to remarry, but the Pope refused to dissolve his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. This led Henry to break away from the Catholic Church. After multiple marriages, he did produce a son, the sickly Edward VI, who died six years into his reign. He was succeeded by his elder half-sister Mary I. Mary was the wife of King Philip II of Spain, a staunchly Catholic monarch, and England was immediately riven into pro-Catholic and pro-Protestant camps, where religious and political divisions were inseparable. However, at Mary's death, she was succeeded by her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth I. Elizabeth never married and died without an heir in 1603. Her designated heir was James VI of Scotland, the son of Mary Queen of Scots (1542-1567). Mary was the granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister Margaret, who had married into the Stuart dynasty of Scotland (she was the wife of James IV). Thus Mary was always a potential claimant of the English throne, and Elizabeth was eventually forced to execute her in 1587. However, by making Mary's son her heir, Elizabeth secured an easy succession for the Scottish king and an easy transition from the Tudor to the Stuart dynasty.

Henry VIII and the Uncertain Succession

The Tudor dynasty oversaw the gradual disappearance of the old feudal organisation of England. The process accelerated when Henry VIII broke from Rome and made himself Supreme Head of the English Church. He had the Catholic monasteries dissolved and re-distributed their vast wealth to his courtiers in exchange for their political support. The same process encouraged the further development of courtly culture, as people gathered around the king in order to secure their political advancement. Henry's son (by his third wife, Jane Seymour) was Edward VI. During his short reign the religious principles of the Church of England were given a strong doctrinal basis and formalised in 1553. However, his successor was the half-Spanish Mary I (daughter of Henry VIII's first wife Catherine of Aragon), who was married to Philip II of Spain. Mary tried to reverse the doctrinal changes which had taken place under her father and half-brother, and many of the leading Protestants were forced to flee to the Continent or were burned at the stake. Mary's accession had been opposed by leading politicians and she had to deal with rebellion throughout her reign. At her death, her half-sister Elizabeth I (daughter of Henry VIII's third wife, Anne Boleyn) restored Protestant rule.

Elizabeth I

Although Elizabeth did not eliminate the religious tensions of the preceding twenty years, they retreated to a simmering undercurrent under her strong rule. Although neither Catholics nor reformists were satisfied with her doctrinal reforms, the majority of the population looked to the monarch as the prime source of authority in religion. Under Elizabeth, much of the power held by the monarch became invested in Elizabeth herself, creating a cult of personality which touched nearly every aspect of Elizabethan society. Internally, the Queen's courtiers struggled to gain her favour, and, externally, England was able to sway the balance of power in Europe between Spain and France. In particular, her ability to manipulate her many suitors without ever marrying had the effect of concentrating the glory of the realm more fully in her person, so that she eventually insisted that England itself was her spouse, and her persona as the Virgin Queen became the object of almost religious adulation. English nationalism and adoration of its queen became one and the same. Despite the growing power of England, Spain

had become the most powerful nation in Europe. In 1556 Philip II (1556-1598) had inherited the possessions of the Hapsburg dynasty in the Netherlands and nearly half of Italy, as well as Spanish holdings in the New World. England inevitably fostered anti-Spanish rebellions by Protestants in the Netherlands, and piracy against Spanish activities in the Americas. Although the Queen took no responsibility for the activities of English 'privateers', she sponsored them financially and rewarded them well. Most famous amongst the English privateers was Sir Francis Drake, who between 1577-1580 pillaged Spanish towns on the Pacific as far north as San Francisco, sailing around South America and returning with £1 million of booty. Philip II sent an invasion force against Elizabeth in 1588, but the overwhelming defeat of the Spanish Armada secured Elizabeth's position. However, at this stage, most English activity in the New World consisted of privateering. English colonial efforts were focused on Ireland, where a combination of expansionism, nationalism, and religious intolerance led to a subjugation of the Roman Catholic populace and its Celtic culture.

The Union of the Crowns

When James VI of Scotland became James I of England, the Stuart dynasty took over from the Tudors with little opposition. James was a Protestant and therefore there was no great cultural break between **Elizabethan** and **Jacobean** England (from *Jacobus*, the Latin form of James). However, James did not inherit Elizabeth's personality cult. During Elizabeth's reign social and religious grievances were muted by her immense authority and effective politicking; however, James could not contain discontent in the same way, and unrest steadily grew, particularly against the authority of the king and the Church hierarchy. The tensions nearly toppled the kingdom in the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, an attempt by Catholic extremists to blow up Parliament and the king. Against the backdrop of such discontent, James turned to the traditional notion of the divine right of kings to rule, only he interpreted this to mean that his policies could not be challenged by his subjects. This brought him into increasing conflict with Parliament. Still, he fostered tremendous cultural achievements—the patronage of Shakespeare's theatre and the publication of the King James Bible in 1611—as well as the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. The arrival of Puritan settlers at Plymouth, Massachusetts occurred at the end of his reign, in 1620. Whilst the English spread to the New World, there was great ambiguity between Scotland and England, which had the same king but separate Parliaments, religious institutions, and systems of taxation.

Charles I and the Civil War

The discontent of Elizabeth's and James's reigns came to a head under Charles I. Puritan preachers agitated all sectors of society, eventually taking Parliament into direct conflict with the King in 1642. Thus began the English Civil War. Parliamentary forces (called the Roundheads after the shape of the helmets they wore) gradually gained the upper hand against the royalists (known as the Cavaliers), and they captured, tried, and executed Charles in 1649. England was declared a Commonwealth (later a Protectorate) under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, who commanded the forces of the Roundheads. Cromwell, was, if anything, a more authoritarian ruler than Charles was, and religious intolerance increased. The theatres were closed, the press restricted, and peace was maintained by military force. When Cromwell died in 1658, his son Richard briefly succeeded him. But no stable form of government had evolved, and Charles II was recalled from exile in 1660 to take back his father's throne.

Charles II and the Restoration

When Charles II came to the throne strict limits were placed on his authority over Parliament. Whilst this did not completely eliminate his power or influence, it did much to assuage the fears of authoritarian rule which had characterised the earlier Stuart period. The period of Charles' reign is known as the Restoration period, but at the time people looked to Charles to bring a new period of English glory to rival the greatest days of the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus. For this reason, England during the period is often known as Augustan England. Even the Great Fire of London of 1666, which destroyed three-quarters of the town, including St Paul's Cathedral, failed to dampen the enthusiasm. The theatres were re-opened, and the King sponsored intellectual groups, most notably, the Royal Society, an organisation established to bring together the greatest scientific scholars in England. However, not all the tensions of the past were eliminated. Charles harboured Catholic sympathies, which he hid until his death for the sake of the peace of his realm. However, his brother, later James II, made no secret of his desire to return England to Catholicism, and people began to take sides well before Charles' death. When James became king, the Dutch Protestant William of Orange, who was married to James' daughter Mary, was invited to invade. In the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 William crushed James'

forces and sent the king into exile. Thereafter, William and Mary ruled as Joint Sovereigns. Mary died in 1694, and William in 1702, to be succeeded by Mary's sister Anne, the last of the Stuart monarchs.

Social and Economic Developments

The period from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth century is often referred to as the Early Modern Period because it coincides with the colonization of the New World and the development of new technologies which shaped the world as we know it. The introduction of the printing press to England by William Caxton in 1476 gradually brought about a more literate and print-oriented culture. The period also saw accelerating urbanization and an economy in which monetary wealth was less synonymous with the ownership of land. This had the effect of encouraging social mobility, both geographically and hierarchically. As a result, many ideas about social institutions which had been inherited from the Middle Ages were actively questioned and debated at a level not seen before. These ideas were not abandoned completely, but they were inevitably transformed. Most notably, the emphasis which the medieval Catholic Church had placed on the salvation of the soul after death gave way to an interest in human virtue and morality in this world. This movement, which had its roots in the Middle Ages but drew much of its influence from the Classical past, is known as Humanism. It sought to understand the principles of human behaviour and human societies, giving great attention to public and political affairs. Humanism also tended to employ empirical methodologies to understand the world, as opposed to the more theoretical ones taught in medieval universities. For inspiration, people turned to the Classical Greece and Rome, and much of the aesthetics of the Early Modern Period thus consciously imitates the past. The renewed interest in the study of the Classical learning (aided by the new ease of acquiring printed editions of ancient texts), led people to think that they were experiencing a re-birth, or renaissance, of knowledge and wisdom which they believed had been lost in the Middle Ages. For this reason, the period, particularly from about 1500-1650, has become known as the Renaissance.

Religious Developments

The single, greatest development of the period is the Reformation, the process by which some Christians in western Europe left the Church of Rome to found their own Protestant churches. The process happened in different ways in different countries, but the English Reformation is a direct result of Henry VIII's conflict with the Pope. Whilst this led to the establishment of the Church of England, it is important to realise that the established Church did not satisfy all the calls for religious reform in the Early Modern period. Protestants known as dissenters objected to the hierarchical nature of the Church of England, and many insisted that there should be no intermediary between man and God, save the Bible. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the most extreme of these dissenters were called Puritans. However, throughout the period, other sects came into being, particularly the Presbyterians, the Anabaptists, and the Quakers. Hence English society became religiously fragmented. In many cases, religious fundamentalists lined themselves up against the new humanist thinking, and religious fervour was often closely linked with superstition, as a result. Witch trials--rare occurrences in the Middle Ages--became common, one of the later examples being those in Salem, Massachusetts during the 1690s.

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century

The Restoration

Many believed that Charles II would bring order, peace, and freedom under law back to the country after the Civil War. However, in 1665 England was struck by an outbreak of the plague, which many considered to be a divine punishment for the death of Charles I. In September of 1666 the Great Fire of London raged for four days, destroying a large part of the City, leaving about two-thirds of its population homeless (and inadvertently eradicating the plague). Nevertheless, the nation prospered and embarked on a process of empire building. The Royal Navy was built up, and after a series of wars with the Dutch and French between 1680 and 1763, England (later Britain) acquired dominions that stretched from Canada to India.

With the king the established Church was also restored, and legislation was soon passed against Dissenters which filled the prisons with nonconformist preachers (like John Bunyan). This culminated in the Test Act of 1673 which required all holders of civil and military offices to receive the sacrament according to the Anglican rite and declare their disbelief in transubstantiation. Both Protestant Dissenters and Catholics were effectively excluded from public life and frequently accused of treason. Charles II secretly hid his own Catholic sympathies and, although he held absolutist views typical of the Stuarts, was too astute a politician to provoke a crisis. The only major political crisis of his reign was the Popish Plot (1678-81), an unsuccessful attempt to get him to exclude his Catholic brother James from the succession. In the turmoil surrounding the Popish Plot, two clearly defined political parties emerged for the first time. The king's supporters were known as the Tories, and his opponents were called the Whigs. In the subsequent years the two factions developed opposed attitudes on other important issues. The Tories tended to draw their support from the landed gentry and the country clergy; they were conservative and tended to support the Crown and the established church. The Whigs tended to consist of powerful nobles who were jealous of the powers of the Crown, merchants and financiers in London, a number of bishops, and the Dissenters, all people who tended to be united by religious toleration and support of commerce.

The Glorious Revolution and the Reign of Queen Anne

In 1685 James II came to the throne and immediately tried to advance the cause of Catholicism. In 1687 he suspended the Test Act and began filling the government and army with Catholics and Dissenters. Secret negotiation ensued to bring William of Orange, the leading Protestant on the Continent and husband of James' daughter Mary to the throne. He invaded in 1688 and James was forced to flee to France. From then on James and his descendants would be a source of anxiety for the English government. The accession of William and Mary to the throne (as Joint Sovereigns) is known as the Glorious Revolution. It was followed by the Bill of Rights (1689), which limited the powers of the Crown and reaffirmed the supremacy of Parliament. The Toleration Act secured freedom of worship for Dissenters, although it did not abolish the Test Act.

When Anne came to the throne England embarked upon a war with France and Spain between 1702-1713. The war was supported by Whig lords and merchants who grew fabulously wealthy off of war profits and the growing empire which soon stretched from Canada to India. Only at the end of Anne's reign did the power shift towards the Tories, largely because Anne refused to undermine the position of the established church. The other important event of the reign is the Act of Union between England and Scotland (1707). This removed the trade barriers between the two countries and merged their parliaments, with the Parliament of Great Britain in London. Many prominent British writers of the eighteenth century came from Scotland or Ireland, suggesting that cultural life was becoming increasingly diverse.

The Hanoverian Succession

Queen Anne had no heir, so the succession passed to Sophia of Hanover (in Germany), the granddaughter of James I, who was Anne's closest Protestant relative. Sophia died before Anne, so her son George I became king. Both George I and George II were largely unconcerned with British affairs and spoke broken English at best. Hence the modern system of ministerial government began to develop at this time. The German-speaking monarchs had little interest in patronising literature, and writers were forced to turn to publishers for their livelihoods and cater for an expanding readership. Thus began a great age of journalistic writing and periodical literature. Britain grew increasingly prosperous through war, trade, and the beginnings of industrialism. However, it was constantly plagued by the exiled descendants of James II, who still had many supporters loyal to the house of Stuart in England and Scotland (the supporters were known as Jacobites after the name *Jacobus*, Latin for James). Jacobite uprisings occurred in 1715 and 1745, until James' grandson Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) was decisively defeated at the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

George III's reign was dominated largely by Britain's increasing colonial power and by movements towards a new social order which spread the wealth down to the working classes. Calls for greater democracy ushered in piecemeal reforms, as Britain wavered between loyalty to old traditions and newer principles based on liberty and human rights. The implications of these calls went largely unnoticed when Britain lost the American colonies in the 1780s, but they could no longer be ignored when Britons were faced with the French Revolution (1789) just a few miles away.

The Enlightenment

The term 'Enlightenment' refers to a series of changes in European thought and letters. When the writers, philosophers and scientists of the eighteenth century referred to their activities as the 'Enlightenment', they meant that they were breaking from the past and replacing the obscurity, darkness, and ignorance of European thought with the 'light' of truth. Not only can we not easily find a beginning to the Enlightenment, we can't really identify an end point either. For we still more or less live in an Enlightenment world; while philosophers and cultural historians have dubbed the late nineteenth and all of the twentieth century as 'post-Enlightenment', we still walk around with a world view largely based on Enlightenment thought. The main components of Enlightenment thought are as follows:

1. The universe is fundamentally rational, that is, it can be understood through the use of reason alone;
2. Truth can be arrived at through empirical observation, the use of reason, and systematic doubt;
3. Human experience is the foundation of human understanding of truth; authority is not to be preferred over experience;
4. All human life, both social and individual, can be understood in the same way the natural world can be understood; once understood, human life, both social and individual, can be manipulated or engineered in the same way the natural world can be manipulated or engineered;
5. Human history is largely a history of progress;
6. Human beings can be improved through education and the development of their rational facilities;
7. Religious doctrines have no place in the understanding of the physical and human worlds;

There are two distinct developments in Enlightenment thought: the scientific revolution which resulted in new systems of understanding the physical world and the redeployment of the human sciences that apply scientific thinking to what were normally interpretive sciences. In the first, the two great innovations were the development of empirical thought and the mechanistic world view. **Empiricism** is based on the notion that human observation is a reliable indicator of the nature of phenomena; repeated human observation can produce reasonable expectations about future natural events. In the second, the universe is regarded as a machine. It functions by natural and predictable rules; although God created the universe, he does not interfere in its day-to-day runnings. Once the world is understood as a machine, it can be manipulated and engineered for the benefit of humanity in the same way as machines are.