

The Seventeenth Century

Social History

One main thread of England's 17th century history involves the decline and fall of the royal court as the central focus of power. Already under the Tudors there had been strong tensions between the royal will and the aspirations of the citizens of London, and the desire of the **House of Commons** in Parliament to have a greater say in policy-making. As the 16th century moved into the 17th, rural society changed relatively little but in London and the other cities a new, affluent merchant class was rising with a strong Protestant spirit that resented imposed authority.

Many people's standard of living rose. While the rich built large mansions, by the early seventeenth century glass had replaced oiled paper in the windows of most ordinary houses. The citizens of the major cities were very dynamic in pursuing wealth. Culturally they were in reaction against the old medieval forms that still dominated Elizabethan court culture: chivalry and mock-tournaments, the romantic world of love and heroism. The newly rising merchant class was pragmatic and **Protestant**, its main reading was the Bible and a major pastime was listening to sermons. The division of English society between traditionalistic and progressive groups finally led to the revolutionary **Civil War** and the remarkable interlude known as the **Commonwealth**.

The Stuarts

"Stuart" became the family name of the rulers of Scotland in 1371. Originally it was the title "steward" that was born by Robert II before he became king in that year. **The Stuarts** became the royal family of England when the last Tudor, Elizabeth, died in 1603. James Stuart became **James I** of England; he had been James VI of Scotland since the age of one. The Latin for James is *Jacobus*, hence the years of his reign (1603 - 1625) are known as the **Jacobean** period. His second son became king **Charles I** on his death in 1625 (the eldest son, Prince Henry, having died in 1612) and gave his name to the culture of the **Caroline** period, 1625 - 1649.

James and Charles were quite unable to understand the spirit of the age in which they ruled. Invoking the "**divine right of kings**", they claimed absolute rights over their subjects and lived in great luxury, for which they were always needing more money. Yet the law in England prevented kings from taxing their subjects without the agreement of Parliament, and the Commons refused to increase taxes and provide money unless the king listened to their complaints. Refusing to compromise, James and Charles tried to raise money in other ways, selling knighthoods and baronetcies, imposing heavy fines for various "offenses", and all the time alienating popular sympathies.

In 1628 there was such a strong conflict between Charles and the House of Commons about money that for the next eleven years the king refused to call a meeting of Parliament at all. He ruled through two powerful ministers, Thomas Wentworth, **the earl of Strafford** and **William Laud**, the Archbishop of Canterbury. They worked hard for the king in pursuing a social and religious program that failed completely to gain popular support. At the same time they organized ways by which the king could get the money he needed for his expensive lifestyle. They became so unpopular that both of them were executed when the Civil War began.

The English parliament could only meet if the king summoned it and allowed the election of the Members of the House of Commons. In 1637, the king provoked a revolt in

Scotland by trying to impose the English style of Church service on the Presbyterians there. He needed an army, that only Parliament could provide, so in April 1640 he summoned a Parliament, which opposed his plans and demanded radical reforms of church and state instead. Charles at once dismissed the Parliament (known as the “Short Parliament”). But when the Scots invaded northern England, Charles had to call another Parliament. The landowners of England duly elected their representatives for the House of Commons and Parliament met on November 3.

The Civil War

The Members of the House of Commons elected for that Parliament, now known as the **Long Parliament**, continued to meet for the next thirteen years and no new elections were held for almost twenty years. They began by voting to execute Strafford; next they imprisoned Laud, then they reversed their policies, and asserted the power of the Commons. They also ordered the closure of all the public theatres in England, so putting an end for ever to the dramatic tradition inherited from the days of Shakespeare. When theatres reopened at the Restoration, they were for a limited, sophisticated public and employed women to play the female roles.

When the Catholics in Ireland revolted in 1641, the Parliament decided to raise an army that Charles did not control. On 4 January 1642 Charles forced his way into the Commons with soldiers to arrest their leaders, known as the **Five Members**, who were not there. This abuse of the Commons’ rights marked the end of a process of breakdown in the constitution. The king fled from London and by August 22 he had gathered a royalist army in Nottingham to oppose the Parliamentary forces that were centred in London; the Civil War had begun.

The division of England was not a clear one. Generally, the rural areas in the north and west of England were conservative and traditional, they supported the king. London and the areas around it, especially East Anglia with its strong links with Protestant Europe, were more progressive and supported the demands of Parliament. Most people hated the war, seeing good on both sides. The king’s supporters were generous and idealistic, but often had little money. The Parliament represented the merchant classes who were easily able to raise loans to finance their army.

There were only a few battles. At **Edgehill** (23 October 1642) the king was prevented from marching on London and he made his base in Oxford. At **Marston Moor** (2 July 1644) the main royalist army was defeated in a battle where the most impressive fighters were volunteers from East Anglia led by **Oliver Cromwell**. These later became Cromwell’s **New Model Army**. They were fiercely committed Protestants, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was fighting with them. They read the Bible before battles and saw themselves as a new Israel. The last battle was fought at **Naseby** near Coventry (14 June 1645) when 13,000 Parliamentarians routed the king’s 10,000 men. That was the year in which Archbishop Laud was executed after a feeble trial.

The king remained free, protected by the Scots until he was captured by Parliament in 1647 and kept prisoner in Hampton Court Palace. He escaped to the Isle of Wight and organized a small “second civil war” in which Scots soldiers invaded England to support the king’s cause. They were quickly overcome in 1648 and many people felt that Charles should die. The Commons was divided on the issue, until Cromwell forcibly retired about a hundred members who favoured making a settlement with the king. Those who remained became known as “**The Rump**” and they set about judging the king.

On January 30, 1649, King Charles I was beheaded on a platform built in front of the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall after a trial in Westminster Hall, where he was humiliated and given no chance to speak in self-defence. He was accused of treason and those who brought him to his death believed that they had finally put an end to the old order of English society. For them the king was the symbol of the unjust distinctions and privileges in society.

The king's claim of absolute power over his subjects was mirrored in the claims of powerful lords at the local level and of bishops in the national church. Abuses of power by those ruling groups had brought many ordinary people to such a state of anger that they chose to abolish the powers entirely. Only they could not agree on what social forms should replace them.

The name given to the new social situation was **Commonwealth**, an idealizing word designed to translate the Latin term *Res Publica* (Republic). After 1653 the dictatorship of Cromwell was disguised by the name **Protectorate** but after the Restoration of the Monarchy, the period between 1649 and 1660 became most generally known as the **Interregnum** (period between two reigns). The whole period was thus reduced to a mere interruption of monarchy, although it was in fact one of the most dramatic moments in English history and is best known as **The English Revolution**.

The Commonwealth

The shedding of the king's blood horrified all of aristocratic Europe; very many people in England, even on the Parliamentary side, felt it was a sin. The radical gesture of the English Revolution in executing the king was remembered and became a model for the French Revolution over a century later. In order to overpower resistance in England, **Oliver Cromwell** used great violence to put down revolts in Ireland and Scotland in the following months.

There was now no head of state and no clear representative assembly. There was also no established national church, but a multitude of independent sects and groups, while the former Church of England bishops and clergymen lived as they could, often helped by friends. The lords who had supported the king were so poor that many had to sell their lands to rich merchants from London. With Cromwell in absolute control, England became a land dominated by commerce and governed by financial interests. It was under him that the bases were laid for England's prosperity in the eighteenth century.

By 1653 the remaining members of the Rump had become interested only in consolidating their own power. In that year Cromwell entered the Commons with soldiers and angrily sent them all home. There was no further assembly of the Commons until the Rump was restored in 1659, after Cromwell's death.

Ironically, Cromwell took the title **Lord Protector** to define his own position in the Commonwealth, which had no constitutional basis. Previously, the Lord Protector had been the regent who looked after the interests of a king who was still a child, as was the case with Edward VI. It was never made clear whom Cromwell was protecting. He named eleven **Major Generals** to exercise justice and keep social order over various parts of England but they were authoritarian and unpopular, especially when they closed all the alehouses.

The Restoration

When Cromwell suddenly died, nothing had been prepared for the future; his son was expected to replace him but he had none of his genius, and in 1660 the traditional social order

was brought back, in what is called the **Restoration**. By a general consensus, the dead king's son was called home from exile in France and became **King Charles II**. The remaining lords, and those wealthy merchants who had bought the lands and titles of bankrupt lords during the Commonwealth were confirmed in their titles and rights, and the national church was once again ruled by local bishops. But society had greatly changed and those leading citizens who had brought back the monarchy had no intention of giving the king any of his previous powers. Those who had sentenced king Charles to death were executed but under the new order king, lords, and bishops were little more than symbols destined to authorize the rights of ownership where it counted: over the means of production, over land, and in the family.

The impression that the Restoration was at the same time a return to the old and a radically new beginning was dramatically symbolized in the events of 1665 and 1666. In 1665, London experienced a return of the plague in a particularly terrible epidemic, known as the **Great Plague**. All the primitive terror returned; houses were shut up if someone inside developed the disease, public gatherings were banned, corpses were gathered each morning in carts and thrown into mass graves. Despite the century's scientific discoveries, no one knew what caused the plague to spread or how to avoid it. Those who could, fled to the countryside. Naturally, some said that this was a divine punishment for bringing back the old social order.

With the coming of winter, the rats and their fleas grew less active and the plague abated. In the following year, on September 2, 1666, a fire began in the eastern part of London, near the Tower. An easterly wind was blowing, the houses were still mostly made of wood, and the streets were narrow. The fire burned out of control for four days and totally destroyed most of the city, including the medieval cathedral of St Paul on Ludgate Hill. Within a few days of this Great Fire of London, **Sir Christopher Wren** had submitted a plan for a rebuilt city on scientific, classical lines, with broad streets and fine buildings. Pressure from landowners eager to rebuild on the old sites frustrated most of his plans, but the rebirth of London from the ashes symbolized the end of the middle ages in a very obvious manner.

All these disastrous events, in which many saw punishment, were interpreted by **John Dryden** in a quite different way in his *Annus Mirabilis* (1666-7). He stresses the way that Charles responded well to the events, not fleeing the plague, and working side by side with the citizens in fighting the fire. Certainly, the rebuilt London with its modern houses of stone and its many elegant classical churches, represented the way in which the citizens of London with their financial power were now the real masters of England.

Whigs and Tories

In the Civil War, **Royalists** had fought for the traditional values and style of life that had existed for centuries in the rural areas, where the landowners ruled like little kings. The royal court was the central image of a culture that had grown out of the traditional Germanic "Hof" (meaning both a farm and a royal court). The lords in their homes were surrounded by people who depended on them for food and shelter, just as the lords depended at least to some extent on royal favour at court. They wanted a land ruled by a king, a church ruled by bishops. The general pattern of life in the shires (rural areas) never changed, marked by the seasons with their farming tasks and their traditional festivals. There was a general tendency to be conservative, to look to the past, to enjoy traditional forms of culture in dancing and singing as well as in religion. The word expressing their ethos tends to be "cavalier", the French for a knight but implying a romantic bravado, the old courtly ethos.

By contrast, the **Parliamentarians** wanted change. They did not admire the past very much but looked forward to a different future. Some were very radical, apocalyptic

visionaries who expected God to establish his Kingdom in England once the old order of king and bishops was abolished. Others merely wanted to be free to make their fortune in the new world that sea travel and exploration had opened. They wanted to be ruled by a Parliament that would defend their interests. They were practical people wanting a simple religion that they could understand easily. They were often Puritans, austere in dress and formal in lifestyle.

After the Restoration people showed a greater toleration of difference in politics and religion. Throughout the eighteenth century these two attitudes were engaged in a struggle for power. Words were the only arms available, so each group applied an insulting epithet to the other. The Royalists called the Parliamentarian Puritans **Whiggamores**, a word originally used to designate narrow-minded Scots presbyterians. The word was soon shortened to **Whigs**. The Royalists were in turn treated as **Tories**, a word used first for Irish Catholic rebels. These words soon ceased to be insults and were adopted as labels covering a broad set of attitudes and principles to which people were invited to adhere.

In the Restoration Parliament, now that the Commons had effective power of the kingdom, each group tried to gain a majority of votes so as to be able to impose its policies. Often the Whigs tended to favour wars because they offered opportunity for profit, while the Tories favoured peace because soldiers were mostly drawn from the villages and had to be armed and led by the aristocrats. On the whole the Whigs were in charge of England until the end of the 18th century, except for a few years during the reign of Queen Anne when public opinion turned against them.

The Whigs and Tories were not deadly enemies, they all cared equally for the good of England. They did not evolve into the modern political parties until much later. They were at first barely defined, loosely linked interest-groups exercising patronage and expressing general attitudes that were widespread in society.

The Restoration years were marked by a growth in the importance of public opinion, shaped and expressed by the innumerable newspapers and periodicals, pamphlets and broadsheets that the collapse of censorship during the Commonwealth encouraged. With the introduction of coffee and tea and the spread of the use of tobacco, the newly-opened coffee shops offered places where influential men could meet to discuss the news of the day over coffee and a pipe.

The Glorious Revolution

Charles II had many illegitimate sons but his wife never gave him an heir. When he died in 1685, his brother became king **James II**. Like Charles, James was a Catholic and both seem to have been quite unaware of how strongly England was opposed to Catholicism. There was a crisis of intense anti-Catholicism when it was thought that Catholics were plotting to take power. Finally, late in 1688, James II was forced to leave England and in February 1689 his elder daughter Mary was proclaimed queen, while her husband William of Orange (from the Netherlands) was proclaimed equal king, since his mother had been daughter of Charles I. **William and Mary** were convinced Protestants. There was great rejoicing, not least because no war or bloodshed had been necessary; the 1688 change of ruler is known as **The Glorious Revolution** or the **Bloodless Revolution**.

The situation was legally a complicated one. James never signed a document giving up the throne and his second wife had just given birth to a son in 1688. The way in which he was replaced left many troubled consciences, especially in the national church. The Stuarts had not yet finished ruling England though. Mary died in 1694 and William, who was not popular in England, died in 1702 after falling from his horse. Since they were childless,

Mary's younger sister **Anne** became the last Stuart queen. She was often pregnant but none of her children survived. In 1701 the Parliament declared that the heir to the throne was Sophia, the ruler ("electress") of Hanover (Germany) whose mother had been a daughter of James I. She was Protestant, she had several healthy sons, and since she died just before Anne died in 1714, her son George became the new king.

George I had never been to England, could not speak English and was not bothered that he had no real power. His family name was **Hanover** and the present English royal family is descended from his line, although they changed the family name to Windsor when England and Germany were enemies during the First World War. The Stuarts did not easily accept defeat, though; there were attempts to install the son of James II (**The Old Pretender**) in 1715 and his grandson (**Bonnie Prince Charlie**, the Young Pretender) in 1745. The accession of George I marks the final end of the royal court as a social or cultural force.

The end of the court

In reading the literature written during this period, the tense political and social background needs to be kept in mind. So long as the royal court existed, it formed a *locus* (place) offering the possibility of defining oneself in almost mythical terms. The system of monarchy constitutes and authorizes a myth of autonomous individual power tending to the absolute. If Shakespeare has so many kings in his plays, it is not because he liked monarchy (we do not know about that) but because he knew that many people see themselves as little kings.

Throughout the 16th century, almost all the writers whose works are still read lived in close relationship with the court. Wyatt and Surrey are obvious examples of men of noble birth who naturally found their lives devoted to royal service. Thomas More is an example of the many people not of high birth who were drawn to the court and rose to important positions in it. Another famous example of similar social mobility is Henry VIII's Chancellor Cardinal Wolsey, whose father was a butcher; but he was no poet. The court was not exclusive, it acted as a magnet to many young men in search of power, fortune, and fame. Which is odd, since all of the people whose names have just been mentioned were executed, died in disgrace, or in the case of Wyatt narrowly escaped execution.

The court must have been a fascinating place, hard to imagine today. There was a steady throng of people coming to make requests, to look for help, to stare at the powerful men and women. Especially under Elizabeth visual spectacle counted for a great deal, with all the ambiguity of her role as a woman (therefore weak) and a king (therefore mighty) emphasized by the ceremonial rituals surrounding her every move.

The court was not located in a fixed place, since the monarch moved from one palace to another and at times went travelling through different parts of England. Elizabeth understood very well the need for a mystique surrounding herself and developed a strong relationship with her subjects by skillfully revealing herself. She controlled her close collaborators in the same way. When James and Charles enclosed themselves in a court from which they almost never emerged, it was the beginning of the end.

Mostly the court was in London and the citizens of London were always aware of their close relationship with the king who was, in a sense, one of them. The evolution of London's society played a vital role in English history. While the Tudors stressed their absolute authority, the citizens of London and more generally the population of England were increasingly feeling their own power. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 served to give the English a strong sense of their special destiny under God, who they believed had

directed events. At the same time, they knew that simple sailors had played a vital role, owing little or nothing to the leadership of the mighty.

A populist movement was inherent in the Reformation teachings that all were equal before God and that all had an equal right to read the Scriptures and interpret them. It was no coincidence that the Reform spread mainly among what would now be called the middle class, the merchants and businessmen who had little contact with the court, not among the churchmen or nobles. During the reign of Elizabeth, the population of London doubled. Those who came to live there were mostly not attracted by the court but by the hope of commercial enterprise.

Yet as always, social mobility meant that the newly-rich aspired to a life-style modelled on that of the established aristocracy. This surely explains in part the interest shown in aristocratic poems written originally for the admiration of small groups of noble friends by such men as Wyatt and Surrey or Sir Philip Sidney. The passage from manuscript to print marks the transition of formal literature from inside the court to the outside world.

Further Reading

Graham Parry. *The Seventeenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1603-1700*. Longman Literature in English Series. 1989.