

## 1. Early invasions and Anglo-Saxon England

The early history of Britain was marked by a succession of invasions. Before the Roman invasion in the first century BC, Britain had been inhabited by Celtic tribes for almost eight centuries. Contrary to a long-held popular belief, however, the Celts were not the builders of Stonehenge, that monumental megalithic site erected in the Salisbury plain by prehistoric men some 1500 years before. Julius Caesar and his Roman legions first invaded the island in 55 BC, but unlike what happened in Gaul—later to become France—, the Roman influence in Britain was never very strong, due to the island being at the periphery of the Empire. The wall built by Emperor Hadrian in 521 testifies to the constant threat posed to the Empire by those fierce Scottish tribes, the Picts.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, Britain became easy prey for the Angles and Saxons, a new race of invaders who came from what is now known as Denmark and Northern Germany. Despite the resistance led by that half-historical, half-mythical figure King Arthur, the Angles and Saxons easily conquered the centre of the island which became known as England (literally the land of the Angles) where they eventually settled. Not only was this the most fertile and temperate area, but the rest of the island being for the most part mountainous, it was a lot more difficult to conquer. The Celts were thus pushed back towards the periphery (Wales, Scotland and Cornwall) where to this day the Celtic culture has managed to survive (Welsh and Gaelic are still spoken in Wales and Scotland respectively). By Roman standards, the Angles and Saxons were primitive, unsophisticated people. They were not united as a nation, so that England became divided into seven different kingdoms collectively referred to as the 'Heptarchy'. They were fond of liberty—a trait that is still shared by Anglo-Saxon nations—and their king was not an absolute monarch. His power was in fact controlled by a council called *Witan* whose members could in some cases elect the king. In early Anglo-Saxon times, decisions concerning the life of local communities (where to build a bridge, how to use common land, etc.) were usually made by assemblies of free men called *moots* and this may have been the beginning of a long tradition of local government in Britain. Mutual help and various social obligations (we would say 'public spirit' today) also seem to have bonded those Anglo-Saxon communities. The fact that the Angles and Saxons spoke German (or, rather, a Germanic dialect) accounts for the strong Germanic component of the English language. The Christianization—and in a sense re-Romanization—of Britain did not begin until 597 when Pope Gregory sent Augustine, who became the first archbishop of Canterbury, to evangelize the island. Along with Christianity, it was also learning which slowly spread all over Britain.

The 9<sup>th</sup> century was marked by Viking invasions. The Danes, as they were called, were violent warriors whose numerous raids, which involved much killing and plundering, terrorized the local people. It was King Alfred the Great who, by uniting the Angles and the Saxons, managed to stop the advance of those new invaders from the North. A treaty signed in 886 resulted in the partition of England with a Danish Kingdom in the north, or Danelaw, and a united Anglo-Saxon kingdom in the south. Eventually, the two populations and languages merged, a relatively easy process indeed since they were both from a common North-European stock. Many words like 'skirt', 'leg', 'sky' or 'window' testify to that Scandinavian contribution to the English language. The period between 899 (death of Alfred) and the Norman Conquest in the 11<sup>th</sup> century was a troubled one with renewed fighting between the old and the new invaders. For a brief period, the whole of England was under the rule of the Danish King Cnut who took over the throne in 1016 and controlled a Scandinavian empire which included Denmark as well as Norway.

## 2. The Norman Conquest and medieval England

The Norman Conquest is usually—and rightly—considered as a turning point in English history. On the death of the Anglo-Saxon King Edward the Confessor, who had no direct heir, two main rivals had a claim to his succession. Harold was an English baron who seized the throne at once, knowing that he would be challenged by William, Duke of Normandy. The Normans were Scandinavians who, almost a century before, had settled in Normandy where they had quickly become assimilated. William and his 7000 men landed at Hastings on September 28, 1066 and quickly defeated Harold's host thanks to clever tactics involving in particular the use of horsemen and archers. Why was the Conquest a turning point? First of all, William introduced the feudal system with a central royal administration which lost no time in making a detailed inventory of England's resources known as *Domesday Book*. William was a strong king who distributed land among his barons in exchange for services and succeeded in restoring order and unity in his kingdom. The Conquest also marked the beginning of the class system in England. As the Anglo-Saxon lords were dispossessed of their lands and replaced by a Norman aristocracy with an alien culture and language—French—, the natural antagonism between the lower and upper classes was reinforced by a deep cultural and linguistic gap which, it could be argued, still divides British society. French remained for a long time the language of the aristocracy (it was spoken at court until the 14<sup>th</sup> century) whereas English remained the language of an increasingly dependent Anglo-Saxon peasantry. This linguistic dichotomy can still be felt in modern English since the educated upper and middle classes in Britain use a much higher proportion of French or Latinate vocabulary than the working classes. The same distinction indeed applies to written and oral English. The Norman Conquest was also the ferment of the Hundred Years War that started three centuries later since many Norman barons now owned land on either

side of the Channel, a complicated situation bound in time to create territorial disputes. The year 1066 was also the last time that England was successfully invaded by a foreign army and this certainly strengthened the English people's legendary sense of independence and insularity.

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries were dominated by the powerful Plantagenet dynasty who ruled over England and part of Western France. Henry II (1133-1189) was not only King of England, but also Duke of Normandy, Duke of Aquitaine and Comte d'Anjou. This was the period of the absentee king Richard the Lionheart (1189-99), of his brother John Lackland and... Robin Hood. The year 1215 marks the first 'constitutional' limitation of the King's power. Indeed, under the pressure of his barons, King John signed *Magna Carta* (see doc. 1), a charter guaranteeing certain rights to free men, which included protection from arbitrary arrest and the principle of no taxation without consent. This was followed in 1295 by what could be considered as the emergence of Parliament when King Edward I summoned an assembly of nobles and clergy (later to become the House of Lords) and an assembly of knights and burgesses (the future House of Commons). Originally, the king, who needed money for his wars, called what became known as the 'Model Parliament' to transmit his financial demands to the nation. Over time, however, Parliament gained independence and began to play the part of a negotiator between the country and the monarch. The history of British democracy could in a way be summed up in the way Parliament gradually took over power from the monarch.

The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries were a troubled period with on the one hand the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) which resulted in England losing virtually all its French possessions and led to the emergence of two distinct, rival nations. The rise of a strong national feeling became manifest in 1362 when, partly as a result of the French wars, English at last became the country's official language. Interestingly, the first vernacular translation of the Bible was written in 1380 (two centuries before it was translated into French) and the earliest medieval poet to write in English was Chaucer whose *Canterbury Tales* were written between 1387 and 1392. The country was further weakened by recurrent outbreaks of the plague, the 'Black Death' of 1349 having wiped out nearly half of England's population. The Wars of the Roses (1455-85), which opposed two rival families—the Yorks and the Lancasters—competing for the throne, made matters worse by weakening Royal authority. At the end of the period, England was in a sorry state indeed.

### 3. Tudor England

The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were dominated by the Tudor dynasty. As often in those days, the conflict over the throne had finally been resolved by marriage, Henry Tudor from the house of Lancaster having taken a York princess as his wife. The period that followed was characterized by political stability and the strengthening of Royal power which, after a long period of decline and chaos, was necessary to restore order and prosperity.

Two Tudor monarchs have gone down in history as outstanding figures: Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth. Henry VIII (1509-47), a clever scholar, art lover and good sportsman, is the epitome of the Renaissance prince. A ruthless, high-handed king, he is usually associated with the Anglican schism, or split with the Church of Rome. Henry, who was preoccupied by his succession, wanted to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon who could not give him a male heir, but the Pope refused to annul his marriage. With the help of his advisers and the support of Parliament, he then undertook to sever the links that had long united the English Church to the papacy, the king himself becoming the 'Supreme Head' of the Church of England in the process. Needless to say that this gave him unlimited power, including the right to dissolve his own marriage in order to marry his young mistress Anne Boleyn. The Anglican schism, however, has a much wider significance than Henry's dynastic preoccupations (the king's divorce was only a direct cause) and should be interpreted as an assertion of independence on the part of an insular nation which could no longer tolerate the interference of a foreign potentate, the Pope, in its national affairs. Under Henry's reign, the Church remained essentially Catholic (the king was at heart a conservative who had no sympathy for Luther's ideas) and very few doctrinal or liturgical changes were introduced. However, monasteries were dissolved and some Church properties confiscated in order essentially to fill the royal coffers.

A brief Catholic restoration occurred as soon as the devout Mary Tudor ascended the throne (she was nicknamed 'Bloody Mary' on account of the 300 Protestants burned at the stake during her short reign) and it was not until the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) that the Church of England—an uneasy compromise between Catholicism and Protestantism—was firmly established. Elizabeth's reign is known as the Elizabethan Age (the English Renaissance in fact) and is famous for its artistic as well as scientific achievements (it was the age of Shakespeare and Francis Bacon, the father of inductive reasoning and early exponent of empiricism). It was characterized by an understandable need for order and peace, after the chaotic episodes of the Wars of the Roses and Mary Tudor's bloody reign.

The Tudor period was also marked by deep social and economic changes: with the increasing demand for English wool, common land was purchased or seized from peasants in order to make room for sheep breeding, a more profitable business than agriculture. Land enclosure, which put tillers out of work, generated resentment and occasional rebellion in rural areas. By contrast, an emerging middle-class of land owners, traders and craftsmen prospered. Just as importantly, the 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginning of England's colonial expansion (the first English colony, Virginia, was discovered in 1585 and named after the 'Virgin Queen'). Last but not least, England became a major contender on the European scene as the victorious war with Spain testifies: the powerful Spanish Armada was defeated in 1588 and the superiority of the English fleet was to last until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 4. England under the Stuarts

The next dynasty was that of the early Stuarts James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649) who were both very unpopular. If the Tudors had been strong monarchs, they had nevertheless respected Parliament (or at least pretended to). The Stuarts, who believed in Royal absolutism and the divine right of kings, completely ignored Parliament: as God's representatives on earth, they thought they were not accountable to men. Resulting political tensions were compounded by religious tensions as both kings were intolerant High Church Anglicans (conservatives opposed both to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism) while the Parliament was staunchly Protestant, if not Puritan. The beginning of James I's reign was marked by the Gunpowder plot of 1605 in which the Catholic extremist Guy Fawkes and a bunch of fellow conspirators tried to blow up the King and Parliament. The aborted plot, which fuelled an already strong anti-Catholic sentiment, is still celebrated on November 5<sup>th</sup> as Bonfire Night.

The Puritans, who were influenced by Calvinism, implicitly challenged the King's authority (and all forms of human authority ultimately) with their insistence on the sole authority of the Bible. They also wanted to purify the established Church whose reformation had not gone far enough to their taste. Persecutions by the King's courts led many of them to leave the country and sail for America where, in 1620, those 'Pilgrim Fathers' founded a colony in Massachusetts. For a time, Charles I even ruled without Parliament, which indeed proved to be a fateful mistake. This inevitably led to revolution and a civil war (1642-1648) opposing the Crown and its followers (conservatives, the high clergy and landed aristocracy) to a parliament supported by an increasingly powerful protestant middle class (merchants, shopkeepers, free farmers and part of the gentry). The origins of the British two-party system can indeed be traced back to the civil war (the Tories and the Whigs dominated English political life until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Rebellion was led by the puritan Oliver Cromwell, an intelligent but ruthless leader, as well as a competent soldier. Charles I was beheaded in 1649, but the measure was unpopular as, although the King was despised, the people remained attached to the monarchy. For about ten years (1649-1660) England was a republic known as the Commonwealth (later to become the Protectorate) ruled by Cromwell's army. Life in Puritan England was anything but pleasant: all forms of entertainment were soon banned as the country's new masters strongly disapproved of the theatre, music, dancing, card playing, gambling and, more generally, of all sorts of amusements. The Puritans, who were deeply convinced of man's sinful and corrupt nature, advocated asceticism (i.e. a very strict way of life) as a way to spiritual regeneration. They stressed the central role of Scripture which they regarded as the ultimate source of religious knowledge and viewed religion as a personal affair between Man and God. The Church being a collective institution, its role was greatly devalued as a result.

Unlike the Catholics, the Puritans advocated simplicity of ritual and firmly believed that salvation could be obtained by faith alone, not by 'good works'. Deeply influenced by Calvin's teachings, they also believed in predestination

and election, thinking that from all eternity, God had chosen some men, 'the elect', who would be saved, the rest of mankind, 'the damned', being irretrievably destined to burn in Hell. This view was in a sense more elitist or 'inegalitarian' than the Catholic belief that all men can be saved provided they lead a good life. Puritanism being focused on such individual values as personal responsibility, hard work and, to some extent, the glorification of riches, some 20<sup>th</sup>-century historians highlighted a possible connection between the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism. Puritanism, however, should certainly not be regarded as a mere ideological by-product of capitalism, the interaction between religion and economic systems being a lot more complex than Marxist historians once assumed. At any rate, Puritanism left a deep imprint on British mentalities, which was to last until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Restoration of the monarchy occurred soon after Cromwell's death in 1660. The transition was effected smoothly because the latter's regime had been almost as unpopular as the previous one (the English, it turned out, did not tolerate despotism, whether royal or republican). Charles II and his brother James were Stuart kings who had strong Roman Catholic sympathies, obviously not a good idea in a now firmly Protestant country in which Catholicism had long been synonymous with royal absolutism, religious persecutions and popish plots—an alien religion in short. Once again, tensions grew between a strong Protestant parliament (which voted the *Habeas Corpus* in 1679) and a king, James II, tempted by absolutism and obviously intent on bringing his kingdom back into the Catholic fold. This time, however, common sense prevailed and the crisis was resolved peacefully. Having no support in the country, James II was deposed in 1688 and replaced by his Protestant daughter Mary and her Calvinist husband William of Orange (then ruler of Holland). This 'Glorious Revolution,' as it soon became known, was a turning point which marked the beginning of constitutional monarchy, Parliament having once and for all asserted its power over the Crown. The Bill of Rights voted the following year confirmed the supremacy of the law over the king, and established a number of fundamental rights such as free elections, freedom of speech, of petition, etc. Religious toleration also became the rule, especially for Protestant nonconformists who had suffered under the reigns of the Stuarts. Constitutional monarchy, whose principles were to inspire such French thinkers as Voltaire or Montesquieu, has remained Britain's political regime to this day. Its main exponent in England was the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), the main British exponent of empiricism.

## 5. The 18<sup>th</sup> century

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was an era of political stability and continuity that has lasted to this day. The union between Scotland and England, which had begun when James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603, was sealed by the Act of Union of 1707 and the union with Ireland was effected a century later in 1800. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period of colonial expansion and consolidation with increasing English domination over North America and India. It was troubled

by wars with France which was then England's main colonial rival. For most historians, the century ends with the battle of Waterloo (1815) which marked the apex of English international supremacy and opened a long period of peace and prosperity for the country. The 18<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed a series of major scientific and technological advances such as the works of Newton (1642-1727) and the discoveries of James Watt (1736-1819), the inventor of the steam machine. The end of the century saw the beginning of the industrial revolution with in particular the development of the textile and mining industries and the emergence of a large, mostly urban working class living in dreadful conditions.

In politics, an important development was the rise of cabinet government: at the beginning of the century, the monarch had been left with a large sphere of action, and was still expected to determine the country's policies and choose the men to implement them. What he or she only needed was parliamentary approval. At the end of the century, things had radically changed: effective executive power was now in the hands of a government—or cabinet—which represented the stronger party in Parliament and whose action was coordinated by a Prime Minister. In the two-party system that had emerged during the civil war, the Tories were High Church conservatives whose faithful support of the monarchy had never failed, while the Whigs favoured progress, political freedom and religious tolerance. Britain now had a parliamentary regime, and this gradual process had no doubt been accelerated by George III's stubbornness and awkward handling of the American crisis which resulted in the loss of Britain's American colonies in 1783.

## 6. From Victoria to Elizabeth II

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is often associated with Queen Victoria's long reign (1837-1901). The period ends in 1914 which marked both the apex of Britain's international supremacy and the beginning of its inexorable decline. On the eve of the First World War, Britain indeed possessed the largest empire that had ever existed. It was a period of peace and rapid economic and industrial expansion due partly to the Empire, but also to the dynamism of British entrepreneurs. It was marked by the advent of the railways which not only revolutionized transport, but deeply transformed people's daily lives and, it could be argued, mentalities. Britain was then known as 'the workshop of the world' and, as a matter of fact, British exports amounted to roughly one quarter of all international trade. Victorian engineers were famous for their inventiveness: George Stephenson designed his first locomotive in 1814 and in the 1850s Isambard Kingdom Brunel built the first suspension bridge and the first iron-hulled steam ship.

All in all, prosperity benefited all sections of the population with the exception of the very poor who lived and worked in dreadful conditions. Victoria's reign, however, was also an era of social and political reform, the ruling classes having understood it was in their interest to reform society in order to avoid social confrontation and revolution. A host of reforms such as the extension of the franchise (or right to vote) with successive reform bills in 1832, 1867 and 1884

were introduced. Living and working conditions greatly improved with in particular the substantial and salutary limitations of child labour provided by the *Mines Act* (1842) and the *Factory Act* (1844) which respectively forbade the employment underground of boys under ten and fixed a six-and-a-half-hour maximum working day for children under thirteen. The *Ten Hours Bill*, which limited the working day of adult workers, was not passed until 1847. So, apart from episodic social troubles (in the 'hungry forties' in particular) the Victorian period was characterized by social and political stability and the same indeed could not be said of 19<sup>th</sup>-century France.

The second half of the century saw the emergence of trade-unionism, but Marxism, being both too ideological and confrontational—in short at odds with British consensual and pragmatic culture, never really took hold. The labour party itself was created in 1893 and this was possible because workers could now vote.

As far as mentalities are concerned, the Victorian period was marked by a revival of Puritanism which had been eclipsed after the restoration of 1660. The Evangelical movement, as it was known, was particularly strong among the now powerful middle classes whose mindset was characterized by extreme prudery, intolerance and narrow-mindedness (some would add hypocrisy), but also, on the positive side, by such core values as honesty, hard work, self-reliance and charity. Lots of successful entrepreneurs were also philanthropists and Victorian bankers and industrialists were renowned for their honesty and trustworthiness (which may well have contributed to their success). Once again, this resurgence of Puritanism coincided with a prolonged period of economic prosperity. Evangelical religion also did a lot to relieve suffering among the poor and was probably instrumental in channelling popular discontent.

Victoria's reign was also marked by some impressive artistic, literary and scientific achievements: the names of Turner, the forerunner of impressionism, or of such great Victorian novelists as Dickens or George Eliot come to mind. In the field of Science, a key date is 1859, the year *The Origin of Species* was published. Darwin's theory of evolution revolutionized not only scientific thinking, but also, just as importantly, religious thinking, as the Biblical account of Creation had to be fully reinterpreted. Painful readjustments and bitter controversies naturally ensued from the inevitable clash between science and religion, most people still believing that the Earth was only 7000 years old and that the world had been created in six days. At the end of the period, the country was all but a modern democracy (women did not obtain equal voting rights with men until 1928, however) and today's Britain is unquestionably indebted to the remarkable achievements of the Victorian period.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, which will be studied in greater depth in the following chapters, was marked by two world wars and the international decline of Britain which lost its empire and was gradually replaced by the United States as the only world superpower. During the long reign of Queen Elizabeth II, British society changed profoundly: the class system became less rigid, Victorian moral codes gave way to permissiveness, and massive immigration from Commonwealth countries transformed Britain into a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society.