

II. The Conflict between Kings and Noblemen

1) From the Norman Conquest to the Hundred Years War: the feudal state (11th –13th cc.)

This period was marked by:

- A struggle between the centralizing power of the king and the growing challenge from the leading barons;
- A considerable development of trade and towns, which helped to disintegrate the feudal system.

The gradual character of the Conquest and the support of the Church enabled **William the Conqueror** (1066-87) to establish a strong centralized state which was in sharp contrast to the anarchy of political feudalism prevailing on the Continent. The Anglo-Saxon system of shires was revived, and a royal officer was placed at the head of each; besides, William prevented the creation of great baronies independent of the royal power. He also established the fiscal basis of the state by ordering a detailed survey of property value in every shire to be made (the *Domesday Book*, 1086-87). The process of strengthening the power of the state was continued by William's son **Henry I** (1100-35) and especially by **Henry II** (1154-89).

Henry II Restores the Royal Power: ENGLISH (PLANTAGENETS)

English royal house, which reigned from 1154 to 1399 and whose name came from the nickname of Geoffrey count of Anjou, father of Henry 2, who often wore in his hat a sprig of broom, *planta genista*. it was used as a family name during the period 1216-1399.

The strong ruler was found in **Henry Plantagenet**, count of Anjou. His mother was Matilda (or Maud), daughter of Henry I of England, his father was Geoffrey of Anjou. He came to the throne of England as **Henry II** (1154-89), first of Plantagenet line of Kings, who were to rule England for 245 years. By marriage and inheritance, he came into possessions; yet he became one of England's great rulers.

He ruled over a vast empire comprising England, Normandy and a larger part of France than that controlled by the king of France. He restored the royal rights, tightened the control over sheriffs and tried to get all courts under the royal control. Henry also started the English conquest of Ireland, which was never fully completed.

Henry II sent out trained justices (judges) on circuit to different towns in England to sit in the county courts. The judge kept records of their cases. When one judge had decided a case, other judges trying the same kind of case were likely to adopt the decision that had been recorded. In the course of years, legal principles came to be based on these decisions. Because this case law applied to all Englishmen equally, it came to be called **the Common Law**. The circuit justices also made more extensive use of juries and started the grand jury system in **Criminal Law**.

Henry II carried on a long bitter struggle with **Thomas Becket**, archbishop of Canterbury, who asserted the independence of the church courts against the king's authority. The church triumphed when Becket was murdered. After making peace with the pope, Henry did penance at Becket's tomb. Becket became a sainted martyr, and for centuries people made pilgrimages to his shrine at Canterbury.

Richard (the Lion-Hearted 1189-99), the brave and reckless son of Henry II, succeeded his father in 1189. After a few months he left England and went off on his long crusade. The country suffered little in his absence because Hubert Walter governed it better than Richard himself would have.

King John and Magna Carta

In 1199 Richard I was succeeded by his brother **John** (Lackland, 1199-1216), the most despicable of English Kings. By a series of blunders John lost almost all his French possessions except the southwest corner. The English barons refused to help him regain his territory. Angered by his tyrannical rule, they drew up a list of things that even a king might not do. On June 15, 1215, they forced him to set his seal to this Great Charter (in Latin, Magna Carta) of English liberties.

Magna Carta is regarded as one of the most notable documents in history. The rights it listed were, in the main, feudal rights of justice and property that had been recognized by the previous kings, but now for the first time these rights were insisted upon against the king's will. Thus an important principle was established that the king himself must govern according to law. In later years, whenever a king over-extended his powers, the people could remind him of Magna Carta.

The Rise of Parliament

Henry III, John's eldest son, was crowned at the age nine and ruled 56 years, 1216-72. He was pious and well-meaning but incompetent and extravagant. The barons took a strong stand against him in Parliament. (The term parliament was gradually coming into use for the Great Council). In 1264-67 the barons, led by **Simon de Montfort**, rose against the king and brought on **the Baron's Wars**. On 14th May, 1264 Battle of Lewes at which Henry III was defeated and captured. These wars ended when Earl Simon was killed in the battle on 4th August, 1265 by Edward at Evesham.

Henry III's son, **Edward I**, who ruled England from 1272 to 1307, wisely accepted the limitations on the king's authority. His parliament of 1295 is called **the Model Parliament** (1295) called so because it contained representatives of the three estates of Barons, Clergy and Commons (i.e. all the elements of a future parliament).. Many of the Laws passed in Edward's reign exist in modified form today.

Edward I conquered and annexed Wales (1285) but failed in his effort to subdue Scotland. He died on his way north to put down an uprising led by the Scottish hero Robert Bruce. His incompetent son, **Edward II**, then took up the task and was decisively defeated by Bruce at Bannockburn. In 1327 Parliament used its new power to depose Edward II and place his son, **Edward III**, on the throne.

2) From the outbreak of the Hundred Years War to the end of the Wars of the Roses: the decay of feudalism (14th + 15th cc.)

Flourishing of English Medieval Life

The 13th century was a time of great enthusiasm for art and learning. In architecture the low, square towers and rounded arches of the Norman period gave place to the delicate spires and pointed arches of the early English, or Gothic, style. New learning was brought into England by friars and other scholars from the Continent. Oxford University won renown all over Europe. One of its teachers, Roger Bacon, a friar, urged the study of nature and the experimental method in seeking knowledge. The Crusades opened commerce with the Orient and brought in new ideas.

Towns became noted for particular manufactures. Craft guilds held a monopoly of manufacture, and merchant guilds controlled local markets. Foreign merchants were allowed to sell their wares only at certain annual fairs.

The Hundred Years' Wars and the Black Death

Knighthood was still in flower while Edward III was on the English throne from 1327 to 1377. The king himself excelled in feats of arms. He soon had a chance to prove his skill. During his reign began the long struggle with France called **the Hundred Years' Wars**. But its real objective was to bring Flanders (the main English wool trade market) and Gascony (the chief supplier of wine and salt) under English control. The long war is traditionally divided into three stages, with periods of uneasy truce between them:

- **The First Stage (1337-60)** was successful for England, because the English army consisted of well-organized professional soldiers, with a new English weapon, the longbow, while the French army was an undisciplined feudal host. The French suffered two crushing defeats at *Crécy* (1346). In 1356 his son, **the Black Prince**, won the famous battle of Poitiers.
- **The Second Stage (1369-75)** was successful for France: the French adopted the strategy of guerrilla war, and gradually reconquered the lost territory except for two ports.
- **The Third Stage (1415-53)** the war was resumed by **Henry V** (1413-22), the second Lancastrian king: he dealt the French another crushing defeat at *Agincourt* (1415) and gradually extended his territory. In 1420, he was acknowledged heir to the French throne. Though he died in 1422, the war continued and, in 1428, the French were defending their last stronghold at Orleans. The appearance of *Joan of Arc* in 1429, however, led to a French revival. The war dragged on for more than twenty years, until the *battle of Castillo* finally ended it in 1453.

The war exhausted England and led to political disruption, which enabled the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses.

The Black Death (1348-51) and the Peasants' Revolt (1381)

The war had come to a temporary halt, when **the Black Death** swept over Western Europe in 1348-49, recurring repeatedly over the next century. More than a fourth of England's population perished. Whole villages were wiped out, and great areas of farmland went to weeds. The serfs who survived demanded high money wages. If their lord refused, they moved to another manor.

The government tried to halt the rise in wages and bind the laborers to their manors once more, but it could not enforce its Status of Laborers. The landlords sought labor at any price, and the laborers formed alliances to resist the law. John Wycliffe's priested (Lollards) and other traveling preachers increased the discontent by denouncing the landlords.

By the end of the 1370s, however, the population had increased and the peasants could no longer demand either higher wages or release from serfdom. High taxes were demanded in order to pay for the war in France: in 1379, the so-called **Poll Tax** was imposed on every male over sixteen. This situation resulted in the outbreak of a **revolt** in 1381.

Richard II, grandson of Edward III, was 14 years old when a great band of peasants, headed by Wat Tyler and John Ball, marched on London (1381) from Kent. The boy king went out boldly to meet them. Will that you make us free forever, the peasants asked. Richard promised to help them, and they returned peaceably to their homes. The king did not keep his promise, within a week the judges hanged 1,500

ringleaders of the revolt. The feudal system of villenage, however, could not be revived. The serfs were gradually giving place to a new class of farmers' free yeomen.

Richard II thirsted for absolute rule and came into conflict with powerful barons. His cousin Henry, duke of Lancaster, led a revolt against him in 1399, imprisoned him in the Tower of London, and compelled him to abdicate. Parliament then placed Henry on the throne of England as Henry IV.

The house of Lancaster ruled England only 62 years, 1399-1461. During this period three Henrys father, son, and grandson wore the crown. Their reigns were filled with plots and rebellions, murders, and executions. Parliament had made them kings, and they needed its support to keep throne. They therefore consulted it on all affairs.

The Wars of the Roses: The End of the Middle Age in England

In 1455, two years after the Hundred Year's War ended, the House of York and the House of Lancaster plunged into a long and bloody struggle for the crown called **the Wars of the Roses**. **Henry VI**, of the house of Lancaster was captured and murdered. **Edward IV**, of the House of York spent most of his reign fighting to keep his crown. The last Yorkist king, **Richard III** gained the throne when Edward's sons were declared not to be the rightest heirs. Peace came with Richard's death in the battle of **Bosworth Field**. The date of Richard's death 1485 may well be used to mark *the close* of **the Middle Ages** in English history.

The Wars of the Roses were the death throes of the feudal system. Battles and executions thinned the ranks of the nobles, and their fortified castles were no longer impregnable after the invention of gunpowder. A new aristocracy was pushing up through the broken crust of feudal society. In the towns a rich capitalist class appeared. Country squires the landed gentry also grew wealthy. The new aristocracy began to seek political power.

England was now the chief cloth- exporting country in the world. Enterprising employers tried of the restrictions of **the Guild System**, supplied wool to farmers and villagers to be spun and made up into cloth. This method of manufacture was called the domestic system, or the putting-out system. It grew steadily and caused the breakup of the guild's system monopoly. Serfdom also gradually died out. The gentry leased their land to yeomen who paid money wages to their free laborers.

French the speech of the governing classes had become blended with Anglo-Saxon into an English speech somewhat similar to the language used today. The great poet Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in this English and the Bible was translated into it. These works were among the first printed by William Caxton, who brought a printing press to England from Belgium in 1476. Printing made it possible for many more people to have books and helped spread the New Learning of the Renaissance. Before the 15th century ended, Spanish and Portuguese explorers had opened up new continents across the Atlantic Ocean.