

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

This period was marked by:

- a struggle between the centralising 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 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), who ascended the throne after thirty years of anarchy (the War of Succession, 1135-54). He ruled over a vast empire comprising England, Normandy and a larger part of France than that controlled by the king of France. (cf.Fig.5.) He restored the royal rights, tightened the control over sheriffs and tried to get all courts under the royal control (he failed with ecclesiastical courts – cf. his conflict with Thomas Becket). Henry also started the English conquest of Ireland, which was never fully completed.

Henry's sons were weak kings: **Richard I** (Lion Heart, 1189-99) because he spent most of his reign fighting in Palestine (in the Third Crusade) and in France; and **John** (Lackland, 1199-1216) because his misrule alienated his barons: in 1215, they forced John to grant them the **Magna Carta** (Great Charter of Liberties), which limited the royal power and laid the foundations for the later Parliamentary monarchy.

Edward I (1272-1307), as able a monarch as Henry II, ascended the throne after another *civil war* (1264-66). He will always be remembered for summoning 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). Edward conquered north Wales (1285), but failed to conquer Scotland: the Scottish kingdom kept its independence from England until 1714.

Magna Carta : In English history, the charter granted by King John (I) Lackland in 1215, traditionally seen as guaranteeing human rights against the excessive use of royal power. As a reply to the king's demands for feudal dues and attacks on the privileges of the medieval church, Archbishop Stephen Langton proposed to the barons the drawing-up of a binding document in 1213. John was forced to accept this at Runnymede (now in Surrey) on 15 June 1215.

ENGLISH (PLANTAGENETS) :English royal house, which reigned from 1154 to 1399 and whose name came from the nickname of Goeffrey 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.

Barons' Wars: civil wars in England: 1215–17 between King John and his barons, over his failure to honour Magna Carta; 1264–67 between Henry III (and the future Edward I) and his barons (led by Simon de Montfort); 1264 14 May Battle of Lewes at which Henry III was defeated and captured; 1265 4 August Simon de Montfort was defeated by Edward at Evesham and killed.

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

These two centuries form the period of transition from feudalism to pre-industrial era. The long war with France helped to form a sense of national identity: a native English culture was born and English became the official language of the country.

The Hundred Years War (1337-1453)

In 1328, the French king Charles IV died without any son to succeed him. This was during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377) who claimed the throne of France, for his mother, Isabella of France, who was too the French king's sister. Yet, the French nobles rejected having an English king and crowned a cousin of the dead king. With the new French king, the French nobles attacked Aquitaine in the southwest of France, which had already been ruled by Edward III. In 1337 king Edward declared war on France.

The hundred years' war began with victory for the English. The French fleet was destroyed at Sluys (Flanders) in 1340. Then, after a short truce, the French cavalry was dispersed by the English archers at Crecy (Flanders) in 1346.

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

In the mid-14th century, an epidemic of bubonic plague called "**Black Death**" swept across Europe. It reduced the English population by nearly a half, which caused a severe shortage of labour. As a result, free workers were able to obtain higher wages and serfs demanded compensation for labour services.

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: the rebels marched on London and held the government at their mercy. King

Richard II (1377-99), who was a boy of fourteen at that time, promised to meet all their demands, but as soon as they dispersed, the revolt was brutally crushed. Yet, there was no return to the previous system, and serfdom had disappeared by the end of the 15th century.

The Wars of the Roses 1455-1485

During the 15th century, the throne of England was claimed by the representatives of two rival groups; the Lancastrians, whose symbol was a red rose, supported the Duke of Lancaster, and the Yorkists, whose symbol was a white rose, supported the descendants of the Duke of York. This led to the war between 1455 and 1485. They ended when Henry Tudor (a Lancastrian from Wales) defeated and killed Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field. He became King Henry VII. His reign witnessed strong government and stability, welcomed by the people weakened and impoverished by the long war.

Thus, the house of Plantagenet came to an end, because Richard III was the last king of that house. With Henry VII, the Tudor house started to rule England. The Tudors' reign lasted from 1485 to 1603. Their monarchs were: Henry VII, Henry VIII, queen Mary Tudor I, and finally Elizabeth I.