

Tudor England

No sooner was the Hundred Years' war over than a long struggle began for the English Crown between two families: the House of Lancaster and the House of York. The **War of the Roses** (1485-85) (so called because both families used a rose as their symbol) ended **when Henry VII (Henry of Tudor)** united the two rival houses, giving origin to the Tudor dynasty.

During Henry's reign the medieval period came to a close. Men were no longer tied to manors and estates in the country; the power of towns, with their educated and industrious **middle classes**, began to make itself felt; there was a revival or **Renaissance**, of learning, partly as a result of the printing press, which ended the Church's monopoly of learning.

Henry's son and heir, **Henry VIII** (1509-1547), was a typical prince: handsome, learned, ambitious and unscrupulous. Succeeded his father and married Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his brother. He also had an instinctive understanding of his times. It was his creation of the Royal Navy that enabled England to realize her imperialistic ambitions under Elizabeth and defy the pope and the catholic powers of Europe.

Henry used parliament to establish himself as the Head of the Protestant Church of England with the **Act of Supremacy** in 1534. His decision to act through parliament greatly strengthened this institution, which had lost virtually all its authority under Henry VII. There was general support on the part of the English people, who were resentful of papal interference in national affairs. His Reformation led to the creation of the religiously distinct Anglican Church. The **dissolution of the monasteries** (and the confiscation of their large estates) served to destroy the papal authority in England and at the same time provide Henry with much needed wealth. Divorced Catherine and married five subsequent wives, he was succeeded by his son as **Edward VI**.

Elizabeth I (1558-1603) was an outstanding ruler; she restored national unity, opposing extremist doctrines and supporting a moderate form of Protestantism similar of her father's. Her reign is considered by many as the **Golden Age** of English history, producing not only poets of the same nature of Shakespeare and Spenser, but also prosperity for the entire nation. The discovery of America places Britain at the centre of the world's trading routes and brilliant naval commanders (especially Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh) enabled England to dominate these trade routes. During this period great trading companies, like the East India Company, were also established. Parliament was regularly called and consulted,

while Justice of the Peace administered justice and carried out all the ordinary functions of local government.

The Stuart era (1603-1714)

The early Stuarts, the Civil War and the Republican period (1603-60) James VI of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth on the English throne as **James I** (1603- 25). His financial difficulties, combined with his belief in the “divine right of kings” and unwise religious and foreign policy, angered Parliament.

An organised opposition to the Crown emerged, however, under his son **Charles I** (1625-49) due to his desire for absolute power, as well as his unparliamentary methods of obtaining money. The growing conflict led to the outbreak of the **Civil War** (1642-49) between the supporters of the King (Royalists or “*Cavaliers*”) and of Parliament (parliamentary party or “*Roundheads*”). The victory of the radical wing of the Parliamentary party led by **Oliver Cromwell** (1599-1658) in the Second Civil War resulted in the king’s execution and the establishment of a republican regime, the **Commonwealth** (1649-54). It was, however, soon followed by Cromwell’s **Protectorate** (1654-59), a Puritan military dictatorship.

The new state became recognised and respected abroad. Ireland was cruelly “pacified” and Ulster resettled with British settlers; Scotland and Ireland were annexed to England. But the religious and intellectual tyranny of the Puritans and high taxes alienated English people and, soon after Cromwell’s death, the republican regime collapsed and the monarchy was restored.