

The Commonwealth of England



Following the intervention of a powerful Scottish army and the defeat of the king's forces at Marston Moor in 1644, Charles lost control of the north of Britain.

The following year, Charles was defeated by parliament's New Model Army at Naseby and it became clear that the Royalist cause was lost.

Unwilling to surrender to the Parliamentarians, the king gave himself up to the Scots instead, but when they finally left England, the Scots handed Charles over to their parliamentary allies.

Still determined not to compromise with his enemies, the captive king managed to stir up a new bout of violence known as the Second Civil War.

Realising that the kingdom could never be settled in peace while Charles I remained alive, a number of radical MPs and officers in the New Model Army eventually decided that the king had to be charged with high treason. Charles was accordingly tried, found guilty, and beheaded in January 1649.

In the wake of the king's execution, a republican regime was established in England, a regime which was chiefly underpinned by the stark military power of the New Model Army.

England's new rulers were determined to re-establish England's traditional dominance over Ireland, and in 1649 they sent a force under Oliver Cromwell to undertake the reconquest of Ireland, a task that was effectively completed by 1652.

Meanwhile, Charles I's eldest son had come to an agreement with the Scots and in January 1651 had been crowned as Charles II of Scotland. Later that year, Charles invaded England with a Scottish army, but was defeated by Cromwell at Worcester.

The young king just managed to avoid capture, and later escaped to France. His Scottish subjects were left in a sorry plight, and soon the Parliamentarians had conquered the whole of Scotland.

In 1653, Cromwell was installed as 'lord protector' of the new Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. Over the next five years, he strove to establish broad-based support for godly republican government with scant success.

Cromwell died in 1658 and was succeeded as protector by his son, Richard, but Richard had little aptitude for the part he was now called upon to play and abdicated eight months later.

English Civil War and England Under Cromwell

World History: Human Legacy, Holt

Leading the Roundhead forces was a member of Parliament named Oliver Cromwell. He had risen to leadership as an army general. In 1644, at the first truly decisive battle of the war, he led a victory in which 4,000 of the king's soldiers died. Cromwell continued to rise in power until he became commander-in-chief of Parliament's army. The Royalist army was outmatched by Cromwell's disciplined troops. In 1646 the king surrendered. Now in full control, Cromwell dismissed all members of Parliament who disagreed with him. Those who were left made up what was called the Rump Parliament.

Trial and Execution

Eventually the Rump Parliament charged the king with treason and put him on trial. During his trial, Charles defended himself with great eloquence but refused to even recognize Parliament's authority to try him. "I do stand more for the liberty of my people than any here that come to be my pretended judges," he declared. In the end, the king was sentenced to death for treason. On January 30, 1649, Charles I was publicly beheaded in front of his own palace—the first European monarch to be formally tried and sentenced to death by a court of law. To some people he was a martyr, to others a tyrant who got what he deserved.

England under Cromwell

For the next 11 years, England's government changed completely. The House of Commons abolished the House of Lords and outlawed the monarchy. England became a commonwealth, which is a republican government based on the common good of all the people. In 1653 Cromwell was given the title Lord Protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Although Cromwell was a skilled leader, he demanded complete obedience. He clamped down on English social life by closing the theaters and limiting other forms of popular entertainment. Cromwell had to deal with foreign issues, too. He led military expeditions to Scotland and Ireland. His economic policies led to a war with the Dutch over trade. To limit Spanish activity in the Americas, he also warred on Spain.

A Defender of Absolutism

Cromwell, the king's death, and the war troubled many of the English people. One of them was Thomas Hobbes, a Royalist who fled to France during Cromwell's rule. Hobbes wrote what is now a classic work of political science, *Leviathan*. In it, Hobbes described humans as being naturally selfish and fearful. Life in nature, he wrote, was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes argued that people needed an all-powerful monarch to tell them how to live. His views sparked controversy during a time when England was trying to find a balance between government by the people's representatives and the monarchy. Hobbes's ideas reflected the fact that many people were unhappy under Cromwell, especially when he dismissed Parliament to rule. Attitudes were changing so much that a return to monarchy became possible.