

# Chapter 1: THE MAKING OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

*To understand a country it is important to know something about its history. This section is a brief chronological account of how the United Kingdom came to be what it is today. Any account of history, however, is only one interpretation. Historians often disagree about what to include and what to exclude in historical accounts. As well as the main historical events and people, this section also mentions people who are not necessarily the most important historically, but whose names often appear in books, newspapers and on TV.*

## ***What's in a name?***

There is some confusion about the correct meanings and use of the terms 'United Kingdom', 'British Isles', 'Britain' and 'British'. The United Kingdom consists today of four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (the rest of Ireland is an independent country). These four countries came together at different times to form a union called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which is the official name of the country. The name 'Britain' or 'Great Britain' refers only to England, Scotland and Wales, not to Northern Ireland. The adjective 'British', however, usually refers to everyone in the UK, including Northern Ireland. There are also several islands which are closely linked with the United Kingdom but do not form part of it: the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. These have kept their own institutions of government and are called 'Crown Territories'.

In the United Kingdom, national identity and citizenship do not always mean the same thing. The Scottish and Welsh will usually say that they have British (or UK) citizenship, but that their nationality is Scottish or Welsh. In Northern Ireland some people say they are British, some people say they are Irish and some people say they are both. This depends on their political and cultural allegiances. People born in England will more often say that their nationality as well as their citizenship is British.

Many important institutions are common to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, such as the laws and customs of the Constitution, the Crown as a symbol of unity, and parliamentary and representative government. But there are many important differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now have parliaments or assemblies of their own, with limited but

significant powers. In sport there are four different football teams which play separately in international competitions, but there is only one Olympic team for the whole of the United Kingdom.

In addition to national diversity, there is a very long tradition of ethnic and religious diversity in the United Kingdom. This goes back to early history, as you will see in this chapter.

## ***Early Britain***

### **The Roman Conquest**

In very early history the land was populated by tribes who came to the British Isles from different parts of Europe. Stonehenge, the great prehistoric temple which still stands in what is now the English county of Wiltshire, is one of the great monuments of prehistoric Europe. In later centuries Britain was invaded by Celtic tribes who had a sophisticated culture and economy. The people spoke Celtic dialects which later became the languages which are spoken today in some parts of Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

### **The Romans**

In 55 BC the Romans, who had an empire covering most of the Mediterranean lands, first came to Britain with Julius Caesar. Nearly a hundred years later they came back and began a conquest of all of Britain except the highlands of Scotland. There was strong opposition from the native tribes who fought to try and keep the Romans out. A famous tribal leader who fought the Romans was Boudicca, the queen of the Iceni in what is now eastern England. Later, when the tribes in the south of the island had been conquered, one of the emperors, Hadrian, built a wall in the north of England to keep out the Picts (ancestors of the Scottish people; the Scots were originally a tribe who came over from Ireland). Parts of this wall can still be seen today.

The Romans had a big impact on life in Britain. Before they left in 410 AD, they established medical practice, created a structure of administration and law, and built great public buildings and roads. The language of the Romans was Latin. Those local people who learned to speak, read and write Latin often became administrators and traders.

## **After the Romans**

As the Roman Empire gradually became weaker, new tribes invaded from northern Europe looking for better land. These were called the Jutes, Angles and Saxons. These people spoke dialects which later became the basis of English. The people of Britain fought against these new invaders and were led for a while in the 6th century by the legendary King Arthur. Eventually, however, the invaders took over all of southern and eastern Britain, setting up their own kingdoms and pushing the Britons to the west and to the north.

During the 6<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries from Rome led by St Augustine came to Britain and spread the new religion of Christianity across the south. Monks from Ireland did the same in the north of Britain.

## **The Norse invaders**

In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, Vikings from Denmark and Norway invaded Britain and Ireland. They conquered many of the small kingdoms of the east of England and Scotland. Gradually the kingdoms in England were united under the kings of Wessex and became strong enough to fight against the Vikings. King Alfred the Great defeated the Vikings in England at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. They were also defeated in Scotland and Ireland. Yet many of the Viking invaders stayed, especially in the east of England where many names of places come from the Viking languages. They farmed the land, mixed with the local populations and converted to Christianity. For a while in the 11<sup>th</sup> century they again ruled England under King Canute. Their languages also had an influence on the early forms of English and, in Scotland, on Gaelic.

## **The Norman Conquest**

After King Canute, the Saxons again ruled England until an invasion led by William, Duke of Normandy (part of today's France) in 1066. He is also called William the Conqueror. William defeated Harold, the King of England, at the battle of Hastings. The Norman Conquest was the last successful foreign invasion of England.

The Normans took complete ownership of the land and introduced new laws and administration. Norman French became the official language and had a big influence on the Anglo-Saxon language of the common people. The Normans and the kings who followed them began the conquest of Wales

and some parts of Ireland. They did not yet invade Scotland but the Scottish kings and nobility in the south were strongly influenced by Norman-French culture. The first Jewish settlements in the UK were also established at this time. William the Conqueror encouraged Jews from France to settle in Britain. Jewish communities grew up in several towns and cities.

## ***The Middle Ages***

### **Times of war**

The period after the Norman Conquest is called the Middle Ages or the medieval period. It lasted until about 1485. It was a time of almost constant war. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, many knights from the British Isles took part in the Crusades, in which European Christians fought for control of Jerusalem and of other cities in the Holy Land. King Richard I (known as Richard the Lionheart) spent much of his reign taking part in the Crusades.

At home, the English kings tried to dominate the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish. The Scots, led by Robert the Bruce, defeated the English at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314; the English kings were unable to conquer the Scots during the Middle Ages.

In Wales, however, the English managed to destroy the power of the Welsh princes by 1300. They built huge castles to maintain their power and by the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the last Welsh rebellions had been put down. From 1536, England imposed its laws on Wales and the English language became compulsory for legal and official purposes.

During the Middle Ages, the English kings also fought a long war with the French, called the Hundred Years War. The English won some important battles against the French, such as the battle of Agincourt, which Shakespeare describes in his play *Henry V*. Later the French fought back and reclaimed their country.

### **The origins of Parliament**

The origins of Parliament lie in the early Middle Ages. Before 1215, there were no laws to limit the power of the king of England. The most powerful landowners, the barons, wanted to make sure that their voices were heard and that new taxes could only be made with their agreement. In 1215, the

barons forced King John to sign a charter of rights called the Magna Carta (which means the Great Charter). This was not a charter of rights for the common people, but it did take away the absolute power of the king. The king could no longer collect taxes without the consent of the barons. To make or change laws he had to consult and negotiate with them. At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Parliament gradually became the place where the king consulted with his subjects.

The English Parliament was not unique: there were parliaments in Scotland and much of the rest of Europe in the Middle Ages. The English Parliament did, however, become the most developed in Europe. The aristocrats and great landowners sat in the House of Lords, but there was also a separate House of Commons. The House of Commons represented country landowners and wealthy people in the market towns and cities. Judges began to develop English common law by a process of precedent and tradition. They were independent of the Crown. In Scotland there were similar developments, except that there were three Houses of Parliament (called 'estates'), the Lords, the Commons and the clergy, and the legal system developed as a codified one – the laws were written down.

## **Changes in the economy**

In England, in Norman times, under the system called feudalism, landlords owned the land and the people who worked on their land were called serfs. They did not earn any money for their work on the land and were not allowed to move away, but they did have a small area of the lord's land on which they grew enough food to survive. The same system developed in southern Scotland, but in the north of Scotland and in Ireland land was owned in common by members of the 'clans'.

In 1348, a third of the population of England died in the plague called the Black Death. This was one of the worst disasters ever to strike Britain and Europe but because it created a shortage of labour it helped to improve conditions for the poor in the long run.

The feudal system gradually changed to a system based on wages. New social classes appeared, including large landowners called gentry and smaller farmers called yeomen. They became much more independent of the great landlords than their ancestors had been. In the towns, growing wealth led to the development of a strong middle class by the end of the medieval period.

## **The origins of the modern state**

At the end of the Middle Ages, there was a 30-year civil war in England between two aristocratic groups, the supporters of the House (or family) of Lancaster and those of the House of York. This war was known as the Wars of the Roses, because the symbol of Lancaster was a red rose and the white rose was the symbol of York. In 1485 the civil war ended when Henry Tudor won the battle of Bosworth, killing Richard III. Henry became King Henry VII, and established the dynasty of the House of Tudor. Henry VII deliberately weakened the independent military power of the aristocracy and began to strengthen the central power of the state.

## **Language, culture and immigration in the Middle Ages**

During the Middle Ages an English language and culture gradually came into being. This was a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Norman French. Great cathedrals were built, many of them in use today. Three hundred years after the Norman Conquest, people in England began to think of themselves as one nation. One of the first works of literature to be written in English, a long poem called 'The Canterbury Tales' by Geoffrey Chaucer was written at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It describes the many different kinds of people who met and went as pilgrims to a city called Canterbury. The poem is still popular today. In Scotland, the Middle Ages saw the development of the Scots language which was significantly different from the English spoken south of the Scottish border.

This period was also a time of trade. Merchants came from Germany and Italy. There were also people who came to England with special skills, such as weavers from France, engineers from Germany, glass manufacturers from Italy and canal builders from Holland. In 1440 there were 16,000 foreigners in England, approximately 1% of the population.

## ***The early modern period***

### **Religious conflicts**

Henry VII had already begun to strengthen the central administration of England and reduce the military power of the aristocracy. His son Henry VIII continued this policy. Henry VIII was most famous for breaking away from the Church of Rome.

Henry VIII wanted a divorce because his wife, Catherine of Aragon, had not given him a surviving heir. In order to get a divorce and remarry he needed the approval of the Pope, who had authority over all Christians in western Europe. When the Pope refused, Henry established the Church of England. The king, not the Pope, now had the power to appoint the bishops and to decree what people were required to believe.

At the same time the Reformation – a great movement of opinion against the power of the Pope – was happening in England, Scotland, and many other European countries. The people who opposed the Pope were called Protestants. They read the Bible in their own languages instead of in Latin, and interpreted it for themselves. The Protestants believed that each individual's personal relationship with God was of supreme importance. The Catholics believed that it was essential to submit to the authority of the Church, as led by the Pope. Protestant ideas gradually gained strength in England and Scotland during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but were much less successful in Ireland.

In Ireland, the English attempted to impose Protestantism and English laws governing the inheritance of land. The leaders of the tribes in Ireland, the chieftains, rebelled against the English and there was much brutal fighting between the English and the Irish rebels. This created a sense of national consciousness which united Ireland. Many of the Norman-English who had settled in Ireland remained Catholic.

## **The middle way: the reign of Elizabeth I**

Henry VIII's only son and heir was Edward. Edward was strongly Protestant, but he died at the age of 15 and his half-sister Mary became queen. Mary was a devout Catholic and brought England back to obedience to the Pope. Under Mary, Protestants were persecuted. Mary, too, died after only a short reign and the next monarch was her half-sister Elizabeth, a Protestant. Elizabeth I was more moderate than Mary in her religion. She re-established the Church of England and the Christian religion as practiced in England became known as Anglicanism. Elizabeth expected everyone to attend church but did not ask questions about their real beliefs. By keeping to a 'middle way' between the Catholics and more extreme Protestants (later called Puritans), Elizabeth managed to keep peace in England, despite her many enemies. Gradually, however, Elizabeth's popularity rose, along with strong feelings of English patriotism. These became stronger when the English defeated the attempt of the Spanish 'Armada' (or fleet) to conquer England and restore Catholicism in 1588.

In Scotland the Protestant reformation was more extreme and led to constant changes of government. 'Mary, Queen of Scots' was a cousin of Elizabeth I and was crowned queen of Scotland while she was only a baby. Her mother was French, so Mary was a Catholic. The rival groups in Scotland fought to control Mary. When her husband was murdered by her lover and her situation became more dangerous, Mary fled to England. Elizabeth I, however, believed Mary wanted to try to take over the English throne, and kept her in captivity for 20 years. Later Mary was executed, accused of plotting against Elizabeth I.

## **Culture and discovery**

Today the Elizabethan period is remembered for the richness of its poetry and drama, especially for the plays and poems of Shakespeare, who is still widely recognised as the greatest writer in English. The period is also important for England's discoveries and trade overseas, at a time when European countries began to exert power and influence in other parts of the world. Sir Francis Drake, commander in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, was one of the founders of England's naval tradition. In Elizabeth I's time, English settlers first began to colonise the eastern coast of America, a movement which greatly increased in the next century.

## **Two kingdoms, one king**

When Elizabeth I died in 1603, she had no children. Her nearest relative was the king of Scotland, James VI. James was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, but he was a Protestant. He became King James I of England but the two countries did not become united at this time. Scotland kept its own parliament for another hundred years and still has its own system of law.

## **Ireland: rebellion and plantation**

At this time, Ireland was an almost completely Catholic country. England had begun invasions into Ireland many centuries before (in the times of the Normans) but had only succeeded in occupying land around Dublin, an area called the 'Pale'. The Tudor kings Henry VII and Henry VIII had managed to gain control of the whole country and started to introduce English laws and to break down the power of the local leaders. During the rule of Elizabeth, rebellions against the English broke out, strengthened by the attempts of the English government to abolish the power of the Catholic Church. After one of these rebellions, James I began a policy of 'plantation' or colonisation by force in Ulster, the north-eastern province of Ireland. This involved replacing the Catholic landholders

with English and especially Scottish Protestant farmers. Many 'planters' went to Ulster, mainly from the south-west of Scotland. Land taken from the Catholic rebels was given to companies in London. These events had serious long term consequences for England, Scotland and Ireland.

## **Charles I and Parliament**

During the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, the English parliament became more powerful and influential. The king, Lords and Commons were supposed to be mutually dependent and respectful of each other, but there were strong merchant and commercial interest in the House of Commons, representing a growing middle class, many of whom wanted a more strongly Protestant policy. Elizabeth I had many political skills and tried to balance these interests. James I and his son Charles I, however, were less skilled in managing these conflicts. Many thinkers in Europe at that time believed in the theory of the 'divine right of kings' – that the king was directly appointed by God. Charles I was particularly influenced by these ideas and, when he could not get Parliament to agree with his religious and foreign policies, he tried to rule without calling any more Parliaments. A number of refugees from religious policies of James I and Charles I decided to settle in America, where they established the new Puritan colonies of New England.

## **Origins of the English civil war**

Charles I tried to impose the ceremonies of the Church of England on the Protestants of Scotland, who were called Presbyterians. In response, the Scots invaded the north of England. Charles needed money to fight the Scots and this could only be granted by Parliament, but when it met in 1640, Parliament refused to vote to give money to the king to fight this war. Many in Parliament were Puritans who, like the Scots, opposed the king's religious policies; they saw no reason to help him suppress the Scots.

When the Catholics of Ireland, who were afraid that Parliament might attack their religion, rebelled in 1641, Parliament demanded control of the army because they feared the king would use it against them. Charles I tried to arrest five parliamentary leaders, who fled. The chairman of the House of Commons (the Speaker) refused to tell the king where they had gone and said that he was loyal only to the command of the House of Commons. Civil war broke out in England in 1642.

## **Oliver Cromwell and the English Republic**

After four years Charles I was defeated by Parliament's general, the puritan Oliver Cromwell. Charles, however, refused to compromise with Parliament and was executed in 1649. The Parliament itself had to submit to the rule of its own army and Members of Parliament who wanted peace with the king were expelled. For eleven years England became a republic for the only time in its history, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, who took the title of Lord Protector from 1653.

Many Scots had bitterly opposed the execution of Charles I, who was their king as well, and soon afterwards they crowned his son as King Charles II. Cromwell defeated Charles, in two battles at Dunbar and Worcester, and brought Scotland completely under his control. He also finally put down the Irish rebellion which had begun in 1641, using so much violence that even today the memory of Cromwell is still hated by some Irish Catholics.

Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English came to see Cromwell as the defender of Parliament's rights against the Crown. When Cromwell died, however, there was no credible successor to his power and no clear system of government in place. The civil war had created religious and political extremism. Some groups of people questioned the whole foundation of the society and the ideas of property and social class. The first English democratic party, the Levellers, had briefly flourished in Parliament's armies but by the time of Cromwell's death most people were tired of change and wished for a return to stability.

## **The Restoration**

Parliament decided that the best solution was to bring back Charles II from his exile in the Netherlands. In 1660 he was recalled to England and crowned king. Charles II wanted power but he also understood that to rule in peace he could not repeat his father's mistakes. He was popular enough to get Parliament to support his policies and, though he was secretly a Catholic, he re-established the power of the Church of England. The Puritans who had ruled England and Scotland during the Republic were kept out of power and treated harshly.

Charles had no legitimate children. When he died in 1685 his brother, James II, who was openly Catholic, became king. The Protestant majority in England rapidly became worried that he might wish to abolish the Church of England and force England back to the obedience of the Pope. All James's actions during his short reign – his appointment of Catholics as army officers, his defiance of

the laws made by Parliament and his quarrels with the bishops of the Church of England – made these suspicions stronger.

## **The Glorious Revolution**

In 1688, the great lords who were opposed to James II conspired to ask William of Orange, the Protestant ruler of the Netherlands, to invade England and proclaim himself king. William was married to James II's daughter, Mary. When he invaded, there was no resistance in England, and he and Mary took over the throne. This change was later called the 'Glorious Revolution' in England because it was accomplished without bloodshed and because it ended the threat of arbitrary royal power.

James II still had many supporters, especially in Scotland and Ireland, who were called Jacobites. James was determined to reclaim the English crown and got military support for an invasion of Ireland from the powerful king of France, Louis XIV. William defeated James II at the battle of the Boyne in 1690, and James fled to France while William's armies re-conquered Ireland. This victory is still celebrated by Protestant loyalists today. To prevent any further rebellions, the Irish Catholics were prohibited from holding public office and there were many other restrictions placed on the Catholic Church. Ireland remained a deeply troubled country.

## ***Stability and the growth of empire***

### **Constitutional monarchy**

After 1688, many Acts of Parliament permanently changed the balance of power between monarch and parliament. A new Parliament had to be elected at least every three years (later this became seven years and now it is five years). Every year the monarch had to ask Parliament to renew funding for the army and the navy. In order to govern effectively, the monarch had to have ministers in a Cabinet who could regularly deliver a majority of votes in the two Houses of Parliament. The monarch remained an important political figure for two more centuries but could not insist on policies that Parliament would not support: this is called 'constitutional monarchy'. After William III, the monarch's ministers gradually became more important than the monarch. The government of the time was not democratic because men could only vote if they owned property of a certain value, and no women were allowed to vote. Some constituencies had only a few electors

and were completely controlled by a single aristocrat who could force the voters to elect whoever he wished. These were called ‘pocket boroughs’, while small boroughs where the voters could be bribed were called ‘rotten boroughs’.

## **The Act or Treaty of Union**

William and Mary’s successor, Queen Anne, had no surviving children. The English government became worried that the Scots would choose a different heir to the throne than the English. The English put pressure on the Scots to join England in an Act of Union, called the Treaty of Union in Scotland. This took place in 1707. The kingdoms of England and Scotland became the Kingdom of Great Britain. It had one flag, the Union flag, often called the Union Jack. (The Kingdom of Great Britain became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, after a second Act of Union. In 1922 Ireland split into two – the South became a dominion and the North remained in the Union. The Government of Ireland Act of 1922 created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.) While Scotland was no longer an independent country, the Scots obtained trading advantages from union with England while keeping their own legal system and traditional laws, and the Presbyterian Church remained established by law.

## **The Prime Minister**

When Queen Anne died in 1714, Parliament chose a German, George I, to be the king of Britain, because he was Anne’s nearest Protestant relative. The new king still had some political power and influence but was much more dependent on his ministers and their followers who could control Parliament. The members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords called themselves either Whigs or Tories (a name still used today to refer to the modern Conservative Party), but true political parties with mass membership did not emerge until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most important minister in Parliament became known as the Prime Minister: the first man to hold this office was Sir Robert Walpole, who was Prime Minister for 20 years until 1742.

## **The rebellion of the clans**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time of relative peace within Britain. However, in 1745 there was a rebellion in Scotland led by Charles Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie), the grandson of James II. He was supported mainly by clansmen in the Highlands in his attempt to regain the British throne for his family. The king’s army ruthlessly repressed the power and influence of the clans after defeating

them at the battle of Culloden in 1745. The clans lost collective ownership of the land. Chieftains became landlords only through the favour of the English king and clansmen became tenants who had to pay for the land they used. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many landlords destroyed individual small farms or 'crofts' to make space for large flocks of sheep in what were called the 'Highland clearances'. Many people were deported or left for North America as part of the clearances.

## **The Enlightenment**

Generally, however, the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Britain was a time of greater domestic peace and tolerance than previously. It was a time of many new ideas in politics, philosophy and science, which together are often called the Enlightenment. Many of the greatest British thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, came from Scotland. Perhaps the most important principles of the Enlightenment were that everyone should have the right to their own political and religious beliefs and that the state should not attempt to dictate in these matters.

## **The industrial revolution**

Britain was the first country to industrialise on a large scale. Changes in farming, metalworking, mining techniques and the use of steam power brought greater efficiency and increased production. The first large factories were built and many people migrated from the countryside to the cities to work in them. Although many people left Britain and Ireland for the new colonies, the population expanded rapidly. The first Jews to come to Britain since the Middle Ages had settled in London in 1656 and between 1680 and 1720 many refugees came from France. These were called Huguenots. They were Protestants and had been persecuted for their religion. Many were educated and skilled and worked as scientists or in banking, in weaving or other crafts.

At the same time, there was an increase in trade overseas and in colonisation. Britain expanded its power all over the world. Merchants traded with North America and the West Indies, bringing back sugar, tobacco and other goods. Trade in textiles, tea and spices began with India and in the area which today is called Indonesia. The British fought with the Dutch and Spanish traders for a monopoly of trade in the Caribbean. Often, trade led to the annexation of new territories: the East India Company, interested at first only in trading, gradually gained control of vast territories in India in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## **The slave trade**

There was an evil side to this commercial expansion and prosperity – the Atlantic slave trade. The slave trade had started in the Elizabethan era and was fully established by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was dominated by Britain and the colonies in America. The slave traders bought men and women from West Africa, and British ships took them to work on the sugar and tobacco plantations in America and the Caribbean. The slaves were transported in very bad conditions and many died on the way. Once in the Americas, the slaves became the property of the plantation owners and had to work in appalling conditions. Several cities in the UK, such as Liverpool and Bristol, gained great prosperity as a result of this trade. In 18<sup>th</sup>-century London, there were numbers of free Africans and escaped slaves, often working as servants or craftsmen. Some wrote books about their experiences.

The conditions of the slaves in the colonies were so bad that many slaves revolted against their owners. Some people in Britain, such as the evangelical Christian William Wilberforce, were opposed to the slave trade. They put pressure on Parliament to abolish slavery. Public opinion gradually turned against the slave trade and in 1807 it became illegal to trade slaves in British ships or from British ports. Later, in 1833, the Emancipation Act abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. After 1833, 2 million Indian and Chinese workers replaced the freed slaves. They worked on sugar plantations in the Caribbean, mines in South Africa, railways in East Africa and in the army in Kenya.

## **The American War**

In North America the British colonies had prospered and were mainly self-governing. Immigrants from England, Scotland and Ireland had gone to North America looking for a better life and also to escape the dominance of the landlords and of the established church. The notion of liberty was very strong in the colonies. When the British government tried to tax the colonies to pay for their wars in North America against the French and the Native American tribes, the colonies rebelled. They said there should be ‘no taxation without representation’ in the British Parliament. Parliament refused to compromise. This led the American colonies to declare independence from Britain in 1776. The Declaration of Independence asserted universal principles of free government. Many people in Britain and Europe who wanted political reform welcomed the ideas of the Declaration.

## **The second British Empire**

The American colonies defeated the British army with the help of the French. After a brief period of peace, wars with France continued, especially after the French Revolution of 1789. Britain's navy at that time was the strongest in Europe. Britain fought against combined French and Spanish fleets, winning the battle of Trafalgar in 1805. In 1815 the French Wars ended with the defeat of the Emperor Napoleon by the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo.

In 1815, Britain ruled territories in Canada, the Caribbean, parts of India, and a few settlements in Australia and southern Africa. A hundred years later, the British Empire had expanded further to cover all of India, Australia and large parts of Africa. Historians call this expansion of the empire after American independence the 'Second British Empire'. It became the largest in the world, with an estimated population of over 400 million people.

As the empire developed, many people left the United Kingdom to find new opportunities overseas. Many settled in South Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Between 1853 and 1913, as many as 13 million British citizens left the country. There were also many migrants to Britain from various parts of the world. For example, between 1870 and 1914, around 120,000 Russian and Polish Jews came to Britain to escape persecution at home. Many settled in London's East End and in Manchester and Leeds.

## **Industry and political reform**

British industry led the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century there had been a boom in the building of canals. These linked the factories in the cities to the ports. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, George and Robert Stephenson pioneered the railway engine and the building of the railways began. There were also great advances in other areas such as the building of bridges by engineers like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Much of the heavy work of creating Britain's industrial infrastructure was done by immigrant labour from Ireland. Many Irish people migrated to England to escape famine and poverty and settled as agricultural workers and labourers. By 1861 there were large populations of Irish people in cities such as Liverpool, London, Manchester and Glasgow.

## **The right to vote**

The aristocracy still dominated Parliament but there was a challenge from the growing commercial and entrepreneurial middle class in the newly wealthy industrial towns and cities. The power of this new middle class led to the Reform Act of 1832. The right to vote was still based on property but the number of people entitled to vote was greatly increased. The Act also abolished many ancient constituencies with few voters and gave more parliamentary seats to the cities. This began a permanent shift of power away from the landed interests of the aristocracy to the interest of the cities.

After 1832, the working classes and other people without property began to demand the right to vote. The leaders of this movement were called the Chartists. Although the Chartists failed, a generation later the intense rivalry between the Conservative Party (led by Benjamin Disraeli) and the Liberal Party (led by William Gladstone) resulted in the creation of many more urban seats in Parliament and a further lowering of the property qualifications to vote. Although the 1867 Reform Act again expanded the number of voters, still only a third of men (and no women) were allowed to vote. These numbers were enough, however, to force the leaders of the political parties to create organisations to reach out to ordinary voters. This was the beginning of something like democratic politics. Even so, universal suffrage (the right of everyone to vote) took much longer. It was not until 1928 that all men and women had the right to vote. The right of women to vote was won after a long campaign by the Women's Suffrage Movement (the Suffragettes) who had to resort to civil disobedience to achieve their goals.

## **Imperial uncertainties**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Conservative Party favoured the expansion of the British Empire. Disraeli promoted the empire by making Queen Victoria Empress of India in 1876. The Liberals were more uncertain about the empire and were influenced by stories of poverty and the mistreatment of the populations of the colonies. Liberals believed that the empire had become over-large and would soon collapse because of this. They thought the continuous wars in many parts of the empire such as India's northwest frontier or southern Africa, were futile. The Conservatives, by contrast, believed that trade and commerce needed military security and law and order. They also believed that the colonies benefited from the influence of the British.

The Boer War of 1899 to 1902 made both viewpoints more entrenched. The British expanded into South Africa to control the gold mines of the Transvaal, which had been colonised by settlers from the Netherlands called the Boers. The Boers resisted and it took massive manpower resources from the empire to defeat them. To some imperialists this showed the unity of the empire but to others it was a warning that the empire would eventually collapse. The British Empire did finally come to an end as a result of events in the twentieth century.

## ***The Twentieth Century***

### **The partition of Ireland**

Ireland had been unified with Great Britain by the Act of Union in 1801. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been a very difficult period in Irish history. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the potato crop had failed, and Ireland suffered a famine. This caused huge numbers of deaths from disease and starvation and many people had to leave Ireland. The government in London failed to help the Irish people adequately, causing bitterness that still continues. The Irish nationalist movement grew stronger during this period. Some, such as the Fenians, favoured complete independence. Others, such as Charles Stuart Parnell, advocated 'Home Rule' (devolution). In 1913, the British government finally promised Home Rule for Ireland and the Home Rule Bill started to go through Parliament, but the Protestants in the North of Ireland, who were descendants of the settlers introduced in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century plantations, threatened to resist Home Rule by force of arms.

Because of the outbreak of the First World War, the British government postponed the changes it had promised to Ireland. In 1916, however, there was an uprising (the Easter Rising) against the British by Irish nationalists in Dublin. The leaders of the uprising were executed under military law. This only strengthened the support for nationalism in Ireland and led to a guerrilla war against the British army and the police. In 1921 a peace treaty was signed and in 1922 Ireland was separated into two parts. The six counties in the North, which were mainly Protestant, remained part of the United Kingdom, while the rest of Ireland became the Irish Free State and became a republic in 1949. Some people in both parts of Ireland were opposed to this compromise and still wished for independence for the whole of Ireland. This has caused many years of conflict in the North. This conflict, between those wishing for full Irish independence and those wishing to remain loyal to the British government, is sometimes called the 'Troubles'. Only recently has peace returned to Northern Ireland.

## **The inter-war period**

In the 1920s there were improvements in public housing and a general rise in living standards but the worldwide 'Great Depression' from 1929 created mass unemployment, and the 1930s were a time of economic depression and crisis.

British Prime Ministers in the 1930s failed to understand the seriousness of the threat of the German dictator and leader of the Nazi party, Adolf Hitler. The British tried to make concessions to Hitler, in a policy known as 'appeasement'. Many people in the UK blamed the Conservative Prime Ministers of the time for being too complacent towards Hitler and his expansionist ambitions and racist ideology. The British government realised it had to go to war against Germany when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939. In the first year of war, Hitler's armies successfully invaded Belgium, France and the Netherlands. In this national crisis, Winston Churchill became Prime Minister and Britain's war leader.

## **The Second World War**

The Germans prepared to invade the United Kingdom but before they could do this they needed to control the air. The British resisted the German air force with their fighter planes, Spitfires and Hurricanes, and won the crucial aerial battle against the Germans called the 'Battle of Britain'. Even so, the German air force was able to continue night-time bombing of London and of other British cities such as Coventry, which was nearly totally destroyed. Churchill encouraged a national spirit of resistance in the United Kingdom. In the Far East, however, the British were defeated in Singapore by the Japanese, who were allies of Germany. The Japanese then occupied Burma and threatened India.

When the Japanese bombed the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, the USA entered the war. The allied forces gradually gained the upper hand, winning victories in North Africa and Italy, while the Germans lost millions of soldiers as a result of their attack on Russia in 1942. Finally, the Allies were strong enough to attack the Germans in Western Europe in the D-Day landings of 1944. After bitter fighting on the beaches of Normandy, they pressed on through France and into Germany. With their Russian allies they brought about the total defeat of Germany in the summer of 1945. The war against Japan was ended when the United States exploded its newly developed atom bombs over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few weeks later. Although it had played an

important role in winning the war, the UK was exhausted economically. Liberation or self-government movements grew stronger and more successful in India and other colonies.

## ***Politics in Britain since 1945***

### **The welfare state**

In 1945 the British people elected a Labour government, despite Churchill's success as war leader. The new Prime Minister was Clement Attlee. The government established a free National Health Service (NHS) which guaranteed a minimum standard of healthcare for all. Unemployment reduced rapidly. The railways, coal mines, gas, water and electricity supplies were put under public ownership (nationalised).

The Labour Party also believed in self-government for the former colonies and so granted independence to India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1947. Other colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific achieved independence over the next 20 years.

The Labour government provided for the UK's defence by developing its own atomic bomb and joining the new North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), an alliance of nations set up to resist the perceived threat of invasion by the Soviet Union and its allies.

### **Domestic policies 1951-79**

In 1951 Labour was defeated. The government had demanded too much austerity and restraint as the UK recovered after the war. After 1951, Conservative governments made few changes to the new nationalised institutions and to the welfare state which had been introduced by Labour. The country was run under a 'mixed economy', a free market within a framework of public ownership of key utilities, transport and communications. A failed invasion of Suez in 1956 showed that Britain could no longer rely on military power to protect its global economic interests. Even so, the 1950s were a period of increasing prosperity. The Prime Minister of the day summed this up in a phrase that is still quoted: 'You've never had it so good'.

The Labour Party returned to power from 1964 to 1970 and then again from 1974 to 1979, but the UK now faced many economic problems such as inflation, unstable international currency exchange

rates and the 'balance of payments' (importing more than it paid for in exports). There was also a shortage of labour and, from the 1940s onwards, governments encouraged the arrival in the UK of immigrant workers from the former colonies in the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean.

This was a time of conflict between the government and the trade unions. Many believed that the unions had too much power and that they restrained government and business. Both Conservative and Labour governments faced many large-scale strikes during the 1970s which did much to destroy confidence in the British economy. It was at this time, too, that the tensions between the communities in Northern Ireland flared into violence which led to the controversial deployment of the army there and the suspension, in 1972, of the original Northern Ireland Parliament. Some 3,000 lives of civilians and security personnel were lost in the decades after 1969.

## **The Common Market**

Meanwhile, West Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands had formed the European Economic Community (EEC). The EEC had the goal of harmonising political, economic and trade relations between its members and creating a common agricultural policy. It also planned to make the borders free between its member states. A European Parliament was established in Strasbourg and a civil service, called the European Commission, in Brussels. At first the UK did not wish to join the EEC. Many British politicians believed that the links between the UK and the USA and the empire were more important and that the Commonwealth could form an economic bloc based on sterling, but this policy wrongly assumed that the countries of the Commonwealth wished to be tied to the UK economically. When the British government did decide that it wanted to join, its applications were vetoed twice, first in 1963 and again in 1967. The French President, Charles de Gaulle, was not convinced that the UK was committed to the aims of the EEC as these had developed without British involvement. De Gaulle also believed that the UK's influence would be too great, and that its closeness to the United States, both culturally and economically, would undermine those aims.

In 1972, the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath negotiated the UK's entry into the EEC. The country was still divided on the issue of joining, and this led the next Labour government to hold a referendum in 1975, in which the majority voted to continue its membership. Since then, many more European countries have joined, including many countries in Eastern Europe. In 1992, the Treaty of Maastricht renamed the EEC and its related institutions, the European Union (EU).

(see chapter 4)

## **The Thatcher era**

The Conservatives won the general election in 1979 and remained in office until 1997. Under Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister from 1979 until 1990, the government returned to the principles of a strict control of the money supply and a free market economy. The Conservatives privatised the main nationalised industries and public services: electricity, gas, water, telephones and the railways. The power of the trade unions was greatly reduced by new legislation restricting the right to strike. The Conservatives gave people who lived in municipal housing (council houses) the right to buy their homes. This led to a much lower stock of public housing by the 1990s. Mrs Thatcher's economic policies controlled inflation but some believed they also caused a massive decline in industry. Others, however, say this was caused by foreign competition. At this time there was also a great increase in the role of the City of London as an international centre for investments, insurance and other financial services. The invasion by Argentina of the Falkland Islands in 1982 was unforeseen, but military action led to the recovery of the islands. The war and her way of defending her sense of the UK's interests in the European Union established Mrs Thatcher's credentials as a national leader with many voters, although for many others she remained a divisive figure.

## **New Labour**

In 1997 the Conservatives were beaten in the general election by the Labour Party, now branded New Labour to emphasise the changes it had undergone since its years of power in the 1970s. New Labour, led by Tony Blair, wished to break from the old Labour policies of public ownership and high taxation for public services. It did not re-nationalise any of the services or industries which had been privatised by the Conservatives. Its goals were to make existing public services such as education and health more efficient and more accountable. Labour, like the Conservatives, favoured partnerships between the public and private sectors. The arguments were no longer whether public utilities should be privately or publicly owned, but about the right mix of public and private enterprise.

The Blair government broke with Conservative policy by introducing a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly (see chapter 4). The Scottish Parliament has substantial powers to legislate. The Welsh Assembly has fewer legislative powers but considerable control over public services. In Northern Ireland the Blair government was able to build on the Conservatives' success in negotiating an end to the 'Troubles' which had afflicted the province since 1969 and, in co-operation with the

Irish government, to seek political agreement among the nationalist, unionist, and other parties. This, however, has proved more elusive, and arrangements for devolution, agreed in 1998, have been interrupted and are currently suspended.

## **Today**

Today's government faces several issues. Some of the problems are international, such as global warming, terrorism, and the violence in Iraq. Other debates are domestic such as disagreements over taxation, pensions, law and order, health, education, immigration and asylum.

The United Kingdom is perhaps more socially mobile and less class conscious than it was in the past. People have better health than in previous generations and tend to live longer. Although there is still great inequality between the very rich and poor, people are generally wealthier in real terms. The UK is also a more pluralistic society than it was 100 years ago, both in ethnic and religious terms. Post-war immigration means that nearly 10% of the population has a parent or grandparent born outside the UK. Racism remains a problem in some areas, although it is actively combated both in opinion and in law and most people believe that it has diminished. The UK has been a multi-national and multi-cultural society for a long time, without this being a threat to its British identity, or its English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish cultural and national identities.