

1 The emergence of conflict and the end of consensus, 1625–1629



In this section we will examine the early reign of Charles I and his approach to governing his kingdoms. We will look into:

- The legacy of James VI and I: religious issues and divisions; relations between Crown and Parliament; relations with foreign powers.
- Monarchy and Divine Right: the character and aims of Charles I; the Queen and the court; the King's advisors; ideas of royal authority.
- Challenges to the arbitrary government of Charles I: reactions against financial policies; conflict over the Church; reactions against foreign policy and the role of Buckingham.
- Parliamentary radicalism: personalities and policies of parliamentary opposition to the King; the Petition of Right; the dissolution of Parliament and the King's commitment to Personal Rule.

The legacy of James VI and I

Ever since the reign of Henry VIII, England, along with the rest of Europe, had suffered from the split in the Christian faith. On the one hand the Catholics, or Papists as they were often known, remained loyal to the Pope in Rome. On the other hand the Protestants 'protested' at the abuses, rituals and ceremonies of the old Catholic Church and saw the Pope as the devil incarnate. This split, and the creation of the Protestant faith, was known as the **Reformation**, and under Henry VIII and his son Edward VI, England had emerged as a Protestant nation.

Key term

Reformation: refers to the break in the Catholic Church whereby Protestants rejected the authority of the Pope in Rome and Catholic forms of worship and Church organisation. The Reformation split Europe. In England the Reformation took hold when Henry VIII broke from Rome and declared himself Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

Timeline

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 1625 | <p>January: Mansfield's expedition</p> <p>27 March: death of James VI and I; accession of Charles I</p> <p>3 May: Charles marries Henrietta Maria of France</p> <p>18 June–11 July: first session of Charles's first Parliament debates tonnage and poundage; Montagu attacked for Arminian views</p> <p>July: Charles appoints Montagu as Royal Chaplain</p> <p>1–12 August: second session of Charles's first Parliament</p> <p>September–November: Buckingham's unsuccessful expedition to Cadiz</p> |
| 1626 | <p>6 February–15 June: Charles's second Parliament; attempted impeachment of Buckingham</p> <p>11–17 February: York House Conference</p> <p>20 June: Laud nominated as Bishop of Bath and Wells</p> <p>September: Charles orders collection of Forced Loan</p> |
| 1627 | <p>January: England declares war on France</p> <p>June: Buckingham leads army to Île de Ré off La Rochelle; assault fails</p> <p>November: Five knights case</p> |
| 1628 | <p>17 March–26 June: First session of Charles's third Parliament: Petition of Right</p> <p>4 July: Laud made Bishop of London</p> <p>5 July: Richard Montagu made Bishop of Chichester</p> <p>July: Confiscation of goods of London merchants, including John Rolle, who refused to pay tonnage and poundage</p> <p>23 August: Buckingham assassinated</p> <p>15 December: Wentworth made President of the Council of the North</p> |
| 1629 | <p>20 January–10 March: Second session of Charles's third Parliament</p> <p>2 March: Three Resolutions</p> <p>27 March: Charles issues proclamation stating that he will not recall Parliament until 'our people shall see more clearly into our intents and actions'</p> |

Religious issues and divisions

Catholics and Protestants differed in a number of ways. One area was in doctrine – the set of beliefs that defined their religious views. A key difference concerned salvation of the soul. While Catholics believed that the soul could be saved through faith, good works and prayer, Protestants believed that ascent to heaven was determined by predestination. This belief suggested that God had already decided the destination of people's souls. Those who were predestined to enter heaven were known as the Elect and could be identified by their godly lifestyle and devotion. This belief in predestination originated in the teachings of John Calvin, a mid-16th-century theologian who gave his name to a major branch of Protestant believers – Calvinists. Calvinism and its belief in predestination clashed with the Catholic belief that sinners could be absolved of, or forgiven, their sins.

Another area of disagreement centred round the fact that Catholics believed that during the ceremony of Holy Communion (or Eucharist) the bread and wine that represented the body and blood of Christ would be literally transformed into those substances (transubstantiation), whereas in the Protestant service the bread and wine served only as symbolic reminders of Christ's sacrifice. Thus, for Catholics, the ceremony of the Mass conducted before the high altar at the east end (the holiest part)

of the church was of the utmost significance, as the priest was miraculously bringing about the physical presence of Christ. To Protestants this seemed mystical nonsense.

There were also practical differences. In Catholicism, Latin was the language used in services and the Bible. Only the educated would be able to understand and thus the learning of prayers by heart and the theatre of the ceremony were important features of Catholic belief. This was reinforced by ornate decoration of the church itself, with colourful depictions of biblical scenes from which the congregation could learn. The priest, as the intermediary between the people and God, was of vital importance and he conducted the Mass facing the high altar, dressed in ornate vestments (gowns) with his back to the congregation. Making the sign of the cross was a key feature of Catholic worship, as was bowing at the name of Christ and the worship of the saints.

In contrast, Protestants translated the Bible into English, believing that it was important that everybody was able to understand its teachings. In place of elaborate ceremony, a Protestant service was much simpler and would centre around a sermon (a speech inspired by an extract from the Bible). In order to allow people to focus on the 'word of God', the Church was decorated in plain style, often whitewashed. The priest, wearing plain vestments, would conduct the Holy Communion service from the centre of the church where the communion table was used instead of a high altar. This meant that the symbolic delivery of the bread and wine took place in the heart of the assembled congregation. In further rejection of the Catholic focus on ceremony, Protestants also abandoned practices such as the making of the sign of the cross and bowing at the name of Christ.

The **Dissolution** of the Catholic Church in England had seen Catholic worship suppressed, monasteries and nunneries forcibly closed, and all Church property taken by the Crown. Splits remained, however, and while the majority of the population embraced the new Protestant Church of England (and were known as Anglicans) there were some who retained their Catholic faith. At the other end of the religious spectrum there were the extreme Protestants who disliked any feature of the old Catholic forms of worship – these were the Puritans. Elizabeth I dealt with these divisions in a very sensible manner, creating what became known as the **Elizabethan Settlement**. Elizabeth had claimed that she 'did not wish to make windows into men's souls' but would be satisfied with outward conformity to Anglican worship. As long as her subjects attended Church of England services, their private beliefs remained their own. In effect this created a broad, all-encompassing state Church, even extending to those who remained privately Catholic but conformed outwardly to Anglican worship. Only if they failed to attend Anglican services did they suffer **recusancy fines**. The Elizabethan Settlement, albeit Protestant, made some important compromises that pleased those who were unhappy with the break from Rome. In particular, the monarch was termed 'governor' rather than 'head' of the Church of England and the system of bishops was retained to manage the Church. Some congregations continued to use greater degrees of ceremonial in services. Although the deeper theology surrounding transubstantiation and predestination remained an area for disagreement, the Settlement did much to paper over the cracks and create a working compromise.

When Elizabeth died in 1603, the Protestant king of Scotland, James VI, became James I of England and 'King of Great Britain', thus uniting the two kingdoms. In order to maintain national unity, James largely retained the Elizabethan Settlement. Thus, when Charles I became king in 1625, upon the death of his father, he inherited a broad national Church encompassing a range of religious groups.

That said, tensions had begun to emerge. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605, when a group of English Catholics sought to blow up James VI and I and his Parliament, did much to increase the pressures placed on Catholics. More importantly it raised fears and embedded the idea of a grand Catholic conspiracy in the English popular imagination.



Key term

Dissolution: the ending of a parliament. Legally, the right of dissolution lay with the monarch



Key term

recusancy fines: fines aimed at Catholics who failed to conform to Church of England services.



Key term

The **Elizabethan Settlement:** established to end a period of religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants in England. It was brought about by two acts of 1559. First, the Act of Supremacy asserted that the Church of England, under the supreme governorship of the monarch, was independent of the Pope in Rome. Second, the Act of Uniformity imposed a Book of Common Prayer and set down rules for services and the decoration of churches.



Figure 1.1: An engraving showing the Catholic conspirators responsible for the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. The idea of a Catholic conspiracy haunted the minds of English Protestants.

The common belief was that the Catholics sought to bring down Protestantism in Europe and with it the English Church and the English political system that defended the 'true' religion. This fear of Catholicism dominated English political and religious thought for decades. Another source of religious tension came from the Puritans and their attempts to end elements of Catholic-style worship that had remained in Anglican services. James had pleased many Puritans by compromising on some of their demands and had commissioned the famous King James Bible (retranslating the Bible into English). However, one major area of contention remained – the existence of bishops. The hierarchical system of archbishops and bishops (the episcopacy) ensured the king was in control of the clergy who conducted the weekly services throughout the kingdom. However, while the episcopal system meant worship remained uniform, the Puritans disliked it. To them it was too controlling and too similar to the hierarchy of the old Catholic Church; they wanted freedom to preach and run services in their own way. Another group that disliked the episcopal system was the Presbyterian Scots. By the time of Charles's accession to the throne his father had managed to get the Scots to accept bishops into the Scottish Kirk; however, the Kirk remained fiercely separate from the Church of England. The Presbyterian system of worship gave great independence to parish priests and congregations to run services as they saw fit.

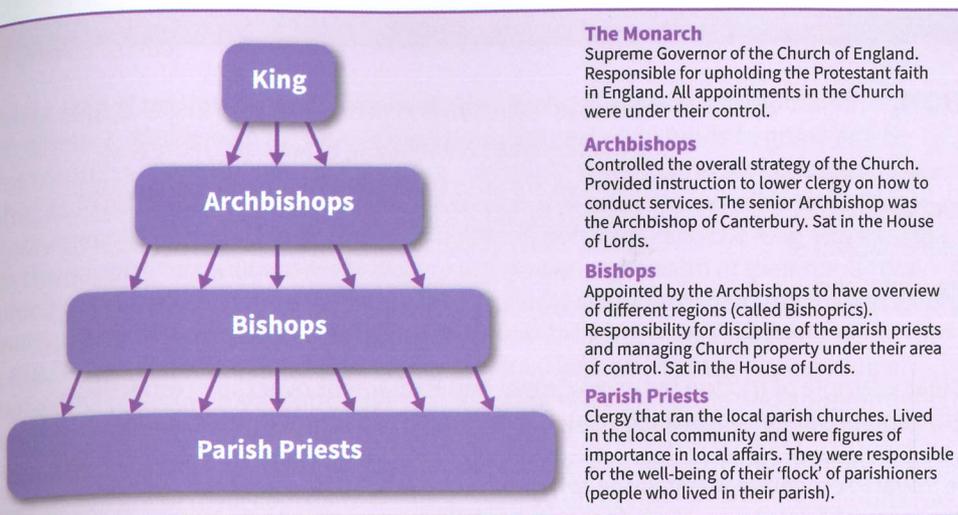


Figure 1.2: The episcopal system of the Church of England.

Relations between Crown and Parliament

The original purpose of English Parliaments was to provide money to the monarch. The monarch could call a Parliament whenever he or she wished in order to vote subsidies (the right to raise, or levy, a tax). Members of Parliament (MPs) often went beyond this remit and discussed areas of national importance upon which the monarch had the right to decide. These areas were known as the **Royal Prerogative** and included religious and foreign policy. Discussion of these issues by MPs had been a constant source of friction between monarchs and their Parliaments for decades, but by the time Charles became king, Parliaments had often been allowed to discuss them in the hope that they would more readily vote the Crown the subsidies it needed. During the reign of Elizabeth I, for example, Parliaments had regularly used the monarch's financial needs as an excuse to discuss issues concerning the Royal Prerogative, such as the conduct of the war, religious policy, and economic policies like the selling of monopolies (see Figure 1.6). This was not so much a long-term attempt to challenge the power of the monarch's prerogatives, but rather MPs seizing the opportunity to discuss matters of concern as they arose. By 1610 an attempt to provide James VI and I with a regular income of £200 000 (called The Great Contract) had failed, one reason being that MPs feared it would give the monarch too much freedom to act without calling a parliament. In short, Parliament was willing to use finances as a bargaining tool on issues that were strictly speaking the remit of the monarch.

By 1625, Parliament had developed a strong sense of its own rights, emboldened by certain parliamentary privileges. These included elections that were free from royal interference and freedom of speech on matters that affected the 'commonwealth' (the good of the nation). This freedom was reinforced by the convention that the monarch would not enter the House of Commons and that MPs were immune from arrest while Parliament was in session. Nonetheless, they too had to tread a fine line, and if they spoke out too forcefully, the monarch could exercise the right to dissolve Parliament at will. Indeed, there was no explicit rule that said how often, or for how long, parliaments should sit. It was only the need to be granted taxes that ensured regular parliaments were called. By the beginning of the 17th century it was clear that certain grey areas existed, such as the status of MPs who were accused of treason and Parliament's willingness to use **impeachment** as a means to hold ministers of the Crown to account.

Key term

Royal Prerogative: a set of powers exercised by the monarch or his ministers. These included control of religious and foreign policy, and the declaration of war and peace.

Key term

impeachment: the formal legal process operated by Parliament by which an official, such as an MP, lord or minister of the Crown can be accused of illegal acts and removed from post.



Voices from the past

**The Commons' Protestation,
18 December 1621**

The liberties of Parliament are the ancient and undoubted birthright and inheritance of the subject of England; and affairs concerning the King, State, and

defence of the realm and of the Church of England, and the maintenance and making of laws and redress of grievances are proper subjects and matters of counsel and debate in Parliament.²

A clear example of friction between Crown and Parliament over their respective rights and privileges occurred during James's first Parliament in 1604. Eager to show their new king what they were made of, 72 MPs expressed their concern that the Royal Prerogative was gaining too much strength. Their complaint, entitled 'The Form of Apology and Satisfaction', resulted from royal interference in elections in Buckinghamshire. In it they complained that 'The Prerogatives of princes may easily and do daily grow, [yet] the privileges of the subject are for the most part at an everlasting stand.'¹



Key terms

ancient constitution: the term used to describe the balance that was thought to exist between the three main elements of the political system – the Crown, the Lord and the Commons. England was thought to have evolved a finely balanced constitution that ensured that no one element was too powerful. This balance of power was seen as something sacred that should be preserved at all costs.

Common Law: developed over time by the rulings of judges on particular cases. These rulings set precedents that then bind decisions in future legal cases, thus providing continuity and equality of justice.

The **Thirty Years' War** (1618–48): a religious war in Europe fought between Protestant and Catholic states. Although England had been at peace in the 1630s, some Englishmen gained valuable military experience in this conflict fighting as hired mercenaries. The only other military experience was derived from the unsuccessful military operations in which England became embroiled in the 1620s.

Tense relations were again seen in 1621 when Parliament sought to give James advice on foreign policy and the proposed marriage of Charles to the Infanta of Spain. James immediately warned Parliament not to 'meddle with anything concerning our government or deep matters of state'. MPs in the House of Commons, stung by the rebuke, retorted in another petition that the King 'doth seem to abridge us of the ancient liberty of Parliament for freedom of speech ... a liberty which we assure ourselves so wise and so just a king will not infringe, the same being our ancient and undoubted right, and an inheritance received from our ancestors.' Insensitively, James asserted that he was 'an old and experienced king needing no such lessons' and proceeded to instruct MPs that their privileges were in fact derived as a gift from the monarch. Infuriated, the MPs immediately drafted a Protestation in which they claimed their privileges as a birthright (see Voices from the past: The Commons' Protestation), only to have the king adjourn Parliament and tear the Protestation out of the Commons Journal with his own hands. A week later he dissolved Parliament.

Despite such high drama, what emerged between Crown and Parliament was something of a balancing act. The King's power was limited by the need to consult Parliament over key decisions in order for these to be passed into law. This balance of interests is what made the system work. Indeed, the ultimate expression of power in England was known as the 'King in Parliament', for only together could the two institutions fully exercise the full powers of government. Figure 1.3 is a contemporary representation of the 'King in Parliament'. It portrays James VI and I on his throne in the House of Lords with peers and bishops seated and MPs gathering at the entrance.

The practical balance of powers between Crown and Parliament was an important part of people's belief in England's **ancient constitution**. The concept of an ancient constitution was based on the idea that English people had a set of legal rights that had amassed over centuries. One important foundation block of the ancient constitution was Magna Carta, or 'The Great Charter', signed by King John in 1215 and reissued by various monarchs who followed. This document had sought to prevent the abuse of royal power and gave protection against illegal imprisonment without trial. Many English people saw Magna Carta as a resurrection of the ancient rights of English people dating back to Anglo-Saxon times. The idea that there existed basic laws and rights that prevented **tyrannical** rule by a monarch was an important one. This was reinforced by England's system of **Common Law**. The fact that monarchs swore to uphold the laws and customs of the realm as part of their coronation oath was thus

significant. As we will see in the section on Ideas of royal authority, maintaining the ancient constitution was sometimes hard when asserting the divine right of the monarch to rule.

A key area of tension between James and his Parliaments was the reputation of his royal court. Well known for his extravagance, he used royal funds to grant gifts to his courtiers. Financial mismanagement was made worse by regular court scandals that centred round sexual deviance, corruption and even murder. This led critics in Parliament to term the king's favourites at court as 'spaniels to the king and wolves to the people'.³ His willingness to place great power and wealth in their hands did much to provoke grumbles in Parliament. The best example of favouritism was George Villiers, a handsome young courtier upon whom James lavished land and title. From 1618, Villiers (later the Duke of Buckingham) handled much of the ageing King's business, including royal patronage (the granting of official posts and appointments). The homosexual nature of their relationship only served to further the idea that the royal court was morally corrupt. In 1614, the Addled Parliament spoke out against the corruption of the royal court and the King's abuse of his right to levy impositions (tax on trade). When it refused to grant new taxes to the King unless he ceased to raise impositions, it was dissolved. James's frustration is well represented in his private conversation with the Spanish ambassador (see *Voices from the past: James VI and I to Gondomar, the Spanish Ambassador*).

Although the relationship between James and his Parliaments caused tension, taken as a whole, his reign signified a period of relative political stability. David Smith has characterised their relationship as 'a rocky, at times verbally violent, yet essentially resilient marriage; despite the ups and downs a divorce was not on the cards'.⁵

Relations with foreign powers

For much of his reign, James VI and I had pursued a peaceful foreign policy. James maintained peaceful relations with Spain by discussing the possibility of a marriage between his son, Prince Henry, and the Spanish Infanta. The so-called Spanish Match was even kept alive after Prince Henry's untimely death in 1612 by his brother, Prince Charles. Although the marriage was never settled, and was highly unpopular within Protestant England, James did well to use it as a means of maintaining peaceable diplomacy with Europe's greatest power. This relationship with Catholic Spain was balanced by his daughter Elizabeth's marriage to the Protestant Prince Frederick, Elector of the Palatinate (a German territory). In 1618, however, the peace of Europe was shattered when European Catholics and Protestants became embroiled in the **Thirty Years' War** (1618–48). James could only resist involvement for so long. Facing Parliamentary pressure, in 1624 he finally relented and sent an army to assist his daughter Elizabeth and his son-in-law, Frederick, reclaim their realm. The same year, Buckingham and Prince Charles had attempted a disastrous surprise visit to the Spanish Infanta in Madrid. The fiasco that this caused turned both men against the Spanish Match and ensured they supported Parliament's calls for war. By his death in 1625, James's kingdoms were once again at war with Spain.



Figure 1.3: James VI and I in Parliament. This print by Reginald Elstrack was published in 1608.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Read James VI and I's comments to the Spanish Ambassador in *Voices from the past* then consider the following questions.

1. What do James VI and I's remarks to the Spanish Ambassador reveal about his attitude towards Parliament?
2. Why might a historian doubt the sincerity of James VI and I's claims?



Voices from the past

James VI and I to Gondomar, the Spanish Ambassador, after his dismissal of the Addled Parliament of 1614

The House of Commons is a body without a head. The members give their opinions in a disorderly manner. At their meeting nothing is heard but cries, shouts and

confusion. I am surprised that my ancestors should ever have permitted such an institution to come into existence. But I am a stranger, and found it here when I arrived, so that I am obliged to put up with what I cannot get rid of.⁴