

The century of the **Tudor dynasty** (1485-1603) is considered the most glorious period in English history. **Henry VII** believed in strong central government and so he built the foundations of a rich nation and a powerful monarchy. The wars of the fifteenth century had greatly weakened English trade; so Henry VII tried to maintain peace at home and with England's traditional enemies (Spain and France), made an important commercial agreement with the Netherlands and created the merchant fleet to encourage English trade and exchanges.

He was succeeded by his son **Henry VIII** (1509-1547) whose reign was marked by the rise of **Protestantism** in England. The king quarrelled with the Pope, **Clement VII**, who refused to agree to his divorce from his wife Catherine of Aragon. She had failed to give him the son he ardently desired to preserve the unity of England after his death. The Pope was obliged to act in this way as he was controlled by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain and also Catherine's nephew. Henry rebelled against the authority of Rome and in 1534 Parliament passed the *Act of Supremacy* by which the king was proclaimed *Head of the Church of England*. Henry, supported by his Parliament, proceeded then to the dissolution of monasteries and other religious houses; he kept much of their wealth and lands for himself and divided the rest among his followers, while opposition was brutally suppressed (Sir Thomas More, for example, the great humanist was executed). His break was purely political, the liturgy and doctrine of the new church remained similar to the old ones as Henry did not approve the ideas of Reformation introduced by Martin Luther in Germany and by Calvin in Geneva. Before the break the Pope had even rewarded him with the title 'Defensor Fidei'. He was certainly a cruel king, wasteful with money and keen on luxuries and pleasures, but he was also a patron of music, languages and the arts. He had six wives, and three children. Mary, was the daughter of Catherine of Aragon he had divorced; Elizabeth, was the daughter of his second wife, Anne Boleyn, who was executed because she was considered unfaithful; Edward, was the son of Jane Seymour who died giving birth to the king's only male heir. Henry was succeeded by his son **Edward VI** (1547-1553) who was a child and who died very young at the age of sixteen.

Mary, his half-sister, (1553-1558) ascended the throne and tried to restore Catholicism in the country by persecuting and burning the Protestants who refused to accept her will (about three hundred people died). Because of this she is known in history as 'Bloody Mary'. The other great mistake of her life was her marriage to Philip II of Spain, which made her more and more unpopular, as England did not want to enter the Spanish sphere.

At her death **Elizabeth I** (1558-1603) ascended the throne and her reign marked the full flowering of the Renaissance in England. She re-established the **Anglican Church** and tried to avoid the excesses of fanaticism looking for a sensible compromise between Catholics and Reformers. Yet the struggle between these two groups continued, and Catholic plots, supported by either France or Spain, were set up to endanger her life and replace her with the queen of Scotland, **Mary Stuart**, who was a Catholic. Besides both Catholic France and Spain wanted an alliance through marriage to get hold of Elizabeth's throne.

Elizabeth was heirless, and Mary of Scotland, who was her cousin, was the natural heir to the English throne. She made enemies of some of her lords in Scotland and was obliged to take refuge in England, asking for Elizabeth's protection. This latter kept Mary prisoner for more than twenty years and in the end agreed to her execution on the charge of conspiring against her.

In the meantime danger came from Spain. With the silent approval of the Queen, sailors like **W. Raleigh, F. Drake, J. Hawkins** had begun to attack the Spanish galleons returning from America loaded with silver and gold. This inevitably led to a war with Spain which, in 1588, tried to invade England. The Spanish fleet, known as the *Invincible Armada*, a fleet of more than 130 ships was defeated in a memorable battle by the English ships which were narrower and faster. Elizabeth also took care of her home affairs such as the inflation of money values, the regulation of trade and industry, wages and working conditions, the situation of the poor, etc. She was a great patron of the arts and during her reign England reached a splendour that made it the strongest and most powerful country in the world.

At Elizabeth's death the throne passed to **James VI** of Scotland, Mary's son, who became King of England and Scotland with the name of James I (1603-1625), thus beginning the **Stuart dynasty** (1603-1714). For the first time the two countries were united under the same crown, even if Scotland kept its Parliament and government until 1707. James was not as wise as Elizabeth. He tried to rule without Parliament, because he believed in the divine right of the kings, so in 1605 there was a conspiracy known as the **Gunpowder plot** to overthrow him. He disliked the **Puritans**, an extreme wing of the Protestants, and did not accept any of their requests for more Church reforms. In 1620, to escape persecutions, a group of Puritans, the *Pilgrim Fathers*, sailed on board the *Mayflower* and reached the coast of **Massachusetts** where they founded the first settlement of England's future North American colonies.

Charles I (1625-1649) was even more stubborn than his father and made unsuccessful expeditions in France (to help the **Huguenots** against Richelieu) and in Spain. He desperately needed money but, as Parliament refused to finance his expeditions, he tried to raise money by borrowing it illegally from merchants, bankers and forced loans. Parliament then obliged Charles to sign the *Petition of Right*, by which he promised that he would raise money only by Act of Parliament and that he would not imprison anyone without lawful reason.

But he believed, as his father, in the divine right of the king, so he dissolved Parliament. He was able to rule successfully without summoning it for eleven years (until 1640) but then, owing to his difficulties with Scotland and Ireland, he was compelled to call a Parliament (the long Parliament), which passed important acts in opposition to the king and later asked him to abandon control of all military, civil and religious affairs. Charles replied by invading the House of Commons to arrest some MPs and this was the spark that started the 'Civil War' in 1642.

At the beginning the king was successful as the nobility, the clergy and a large part of the gentry sided with him, they were called **Cavaliers**, while the richer part of the country, merchants and the middle classes supported Parliament and they were called **Round-heads** (for cropping their hair short). They were led by a gentleman farmer named **Oliver Cromwell** who created a new *Model Army* which, in 1645, defeated the Royalists at the battle of Naseby for good.

The king was put on trial for making war against his kingdom and Parliament, and executed on January 31, 1649.