

BRITISH CIVILIZATION

Strictly speaking, 'Great Britain' is a geographical expression but the 'United Kingdom' is a political expression. Great Britain is in fact the biggest of the group of islands which lie between the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. It is approximately two and a half times the size of Ireland, the second largest. Together they are called the British Isles.

The British Isles today are shared by the two separate and independent states. The smaller of these is the Republic of Ireland, with its capital in Dublin. The larger, with London as its capital, is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This long title, (usually shortened to the United Kingdom or UK) is the result of a complicated history. The island of Great Britain contains three 'nations' which were separate at earlier stages of their history: England, Scotland and Wales. Wales had become part of the English administrative system by the sixteenth century. Scotland was not completely united with England until 1707. The United Kingdom is a name which was introduced in 1801 when Great Britain became united with Ireland. When the Republic of Ireland became independent of London in 1922, the title was changed to its present form.

Apart from the land border with the Irish republic, the United Kingdom is surrounded by the sea. To the south of England, and between the United Kingdom and France, is the English Channel. The North Sea lies to the east. To the west of Wales and Northern England is the Irish Sea, while western Scotland and the north-western coast of Northern Ireland face the Atlantic Ocean.

Britain's System of Government

In theory, the constitution had three branches: Parliament which makes laws, the Government which 'executes' laws i.e. puts them onto effect, and the Law Courts, which interprets laws. Although the Queen is officially head of all three branches, she has little direct power.

Parliament has two parts: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Members of the House of Commons are elected by the voters of about 650 constituencies. They are known as MPs, or members of Parliament. The Prime Minister or leader of the government is also an MP, usually the leader of the

political party with a majority in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister is advised by a Cabinet of about twenty other ministers. The Cabinet includes the ministers in charge of major government departments or ministries.

Magna Carta ‘The Great Charter of Liberties’

In English history, Magna Carta is regarded as the first successful step towards limiting the power of the king and establishing the principle of protection against any form of oppression. In fact, this significant document was triggered by some special circumstances which go back to King John’s reign at the outset of the 13th century.

King John was relying on the aristocratic class in funding his invasions in an attempt to add more territories to his kingdom, yet many families rose against the king’s arduous demands and wished to control him through legalistic means. On 15 June, 1215 they summoned him to meet with them on a small island in the Thames, the Runnymede where he was forced to sign a document they had drawn up, it was a list of rights and duties of the King, the Church and the aristocracy towards each other later known as **Magna Carta**,

In addition to its financial significance, the Greater Charter of Liberties stood against oppression. In clause 39 the Charter states: ‘No freeman shall be ... imprisoned or disseised [dispossessed] or exiled or in any way victimised... except by the lawful judgments of his peers or by the law of the land.

The English Reformation

The English Reformation refers to the end of the Papacy Supremacy over the English Church. In fact, the Papacy in Rome was not behind this cut, it rather happened abruptly and spontaneously when King Henry VIII asked permission from Pope Clement VII to depose his wife Catherine, all in the attempt to have a male heir to the throne. Disregarding the Pope’s refusal, Henry put aside Catherine. By acting so he put an end to the Papacy supremacy over the English church.

After ending the spiritual authority of Rome over England, Henry supported by his Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell succeeded in persuading the Parliament to pass a series of acts which effectively created a separate and independent Catholic Anglican Church with the Monarch as its supreme head. The most famous act was the **1534 Act of Supremacy** which declared that the:

King's Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the Supreme Head of the Church in England and so is recognised by the clergy.

The Counter Reformation

Queen Mary I was a devout Catholic and upon coming to the throne in 1553 her immediate goal was to overturn everything her father (Henry VIII) had done to the Church. The Act of Supremacy was cancelled and the English Church returned to Rome. Restoring the Catholic doctrine was largely very popular but resurrecting the authority of Rome less so. Mary's policy of persecuting the English Protestants¹ sealed her '**bloody**' reputation in history. She burned about three hundred Protestants which was shocking for the English especially that most of the victims were mere artisans, men and women who did not pose any real danger to Mary. In 1558 Mary died and was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth.

The Religious Compromise

The question of religion was the most urgent problem in 1558. Unlike Mary, Elizabeth dealt with the religious problem with great finesse. In 1559 she produced a compromise religious settlement with two acts: **the Act of Supremacy** and the **Act of Uniformity**. The first act re-established the split with Rome and made Elizabeth Supreme 'Governor' of the **Anglican Church**. And the second act, re-introduced the 1552 Protestant English Prayer Book, with modifications.

Elizabeth Tudor was a true child of the Renaissance². She spoke several languages including Greek and Latin. She could also play certain musical instruments and she loved parties, dancing and all form of pageantry. She was very intelligent and politically brilliant. She surrounded herself with capable men and rewarded loyalty.

¹Protestants are adherents to the tenets of the **Reformation** which was a religious revolution that took place in the western church in the 16th century as a reaction to medieval Roman Catholic Church. Its greatest leaders were **Martin Luther** and **John Calvin**. The **Reformation** became the basis for the founding of **Protestantism**, one of the three major branches of Christianity.

² The word 'renaissance' is a French word which means 'rebirth'. The people credited with beginning the Renaissance were trying to recreate the classical models of **Ancient Greek** and **Rome**. The Renaissance period is generally described as taking place from the 14th century to the 17th century, during the 14th century; the philosophy of humanism began to emerge in Italy. Humanism emphasizes that man is the center of the universe and that all human achievements in art, literature, and science should be regarded. Instead of relying on the will of God, people began to act according to capabilities.

In 1570 **Pope Pius V** called all faithful English Catholics to do everything possible to depose the Queen. Nonetheless, only a minority of extremist Catholics responded to the Pope's calls while the majority of the English people choose their Queen instead of the Catholic cause, mainly because they felt secure under Elizabeth.

