

Overview

The history of the English Crown up to the Union of the Crowns in 1603 is long and eventful.

The concept of a single ruler unifying different tribes based in England developed in the eighth and ninth centuries in figures such as Offa and Alfred the Great, who began to create centralised systems of government.

Following the Norman Conquest, the machinery of government developed further, producing long-lived national institutions including Parliament.

The Middle Ages saw several fierce contests for the Crown, culminating in the Wars of the Roses, which lasted for nearly a century. The conflict was finally ended with the advent of the Tudors, the dynasty which produced some of England's most successful rulers and a flourishing cultural Renaissance.

The end of the Tudor line with the death of the 'Virgin Queen' in 1603 brought about the Union of the Crowns with Scotland.

The Anglo Saxons

In the Dark Ages during the fifth and sixth centuries, communities of peoples in Britain inhabited homelands with ill-defined borders. Such communities were organised and led by chieftains or kings.

Following the final withdrawal of the Roman legions from the provinces of Britannia in around 408 AD these small kingdoms were left to preserve their own order and to deal with invaders and waves of migrant peoples such as the Picts from beyond Hadrian's Wall, the Scots from Ireland and Germanic tribes from the continent.

King Arthur, a larger-than-life figure, has often been cited as a leader of one or more of these kingdoms during this period, although his name now tends to be used as a symbol of British resistance against invasion.

The invading communities overwhelmed or adapted existing kingdoms and created new ones - for example, the Angles in Mercia and Northumbria. Some British kingdoms initially survived the onslaught, such as Strathclyde, which was wedged in the north between Pictland and the new Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria.

By 650 AD, the British Isles were a patchwork of many kingdoms founded from native or immigrant communities and led by powerful chieftains or kings. In their personal feuds and struggles between communities for control and supremacy, a small number of kingdoms became dominant: Bernicia and Deira (which merged to form Northumbria in 651 AD), Lindsey, East Anglia, Mercia, Wessex and Kent.

Until the late seventh century, a series of warrior-kings in turn established their own personal authority over other kings, usually won by force or through alliances and often cemented by dynastic marriages.

According to the later chronicler Bede, the most famous of these kings was Ethelberht, king of Kent (reigned c.560-616), who married Bertha, the Christian daughter of the king of Paris, and who became the first English king to be converted to Christianity (St Augustine's mission from the Pope to Britain in 597 during Ethelberht's reign prompted thousands of such conversions).

Ethelberht's law code was the first to be written in any Germanic language and included 90 laws. His influence extended both north and south of the river Humber: his nephew became king of the East Saxons and his daughter married king Edwin of Northumbria (died 633).

In the eighth century, smaller kingdoms in the British Isles continued to fall to more powerful kingdoms, which claimed rights over whole areas and established temporary primacies: Dalriada in Scotland, Munster and Ulster in Ireland. In England, Mercia and later Wessex came to dominate, giving rise to the start of the monarchy.

Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period the succession was frequently contested, by both the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy and leaders of the settling Scandinavian communities. The Scandinavian influence was to prove strong in the early years.

It was the threat of invading Vikings which galvanised English leaders into unifying their forces, and, centuries later, the Normans who successfully invaded in 1066 were themselves the descendants of Scandinavian 'Northmen'.

The Normans

The Normans came to govern England following one of the most famous battles in English history: the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Four Norman kings presided over a period of great change and development for the country.

The Domesday Book, a great record of English land-holding, was published; the forests were extended; the Exchequer was founded; and a start was made on the Tower of London.

In religious affairs, the Gregorian reform movement gathered pace and forced concessions, while the machinery of government developed to support the country while Henry was fighting abroad.

Meanwhile, the social landscape altered dramatically, as the Norman aristocracy came to prominence. Many of the nobles struggled to keep a hold on their interests in both Normandy and England, as divided rule meant the threat of conflict.

This was the case when William the Conqueror died. His eldest son, Robert, became Duke of Normandy, while the next youngest, William, became king of England. Their younger brother Henry would become king on William II's death. The uneasy divide continued until Henry captured and imprisoned his elder brother.

The question of the succession continued to weigh heavily over the remainder of the period. Henry's son died, and his nominated heir Matilda was denied the throne by her cousin, Henry's nephew, Stephen.

There then followed a period of civil war. Matilda married Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou, who took control of Normandy. The duchy was therefore separated from England once again.

A compromise was eventually reached whereby the son of Matilda and Geoffrey would be heir to the English crown, while Stephen's son would inherit his baronial lands.

It meant that in 1154 Henry II would ascend to the throne as the first undisputed king in over 100 years - evidence of the dynastic uncertainty of the Norman period.

The Angevins

Henry II, the son of Geoffrey Plantagenet and Henry I's daughter Matilda, was the first in a long line of 14 Plantagenet kings, stretching from Henry II's accession through to Richard III's death in 1485. Within that line, however, four distinct Royal Houses can be identified: Angevin, Plantagenet, Lancaster and York.

The first Angevin King, Henry II, began the period as arguably the most powerful monarch in Europe, with lands stretching from the Scottish borders to the Pyrenees. In addition, Ireland was added to his inheritance, a mission entrusted to him by Pope Adrian IV (the only English Pope).

A new administrative zeal was evident at the beginning of the period and an efficient system of government was formulated. The justice system developed. However there were quarrels with the Church, which became more powerful following the murder of Thomas à Becket.

As with many of his predecessors, Henry II spent much of his time away from England fighting abroad. This was taken to an extreme by his son Richard, who spent only 10 months of a ten-year reign in the country due to his involvement in the crusades.

The last of the Angevin kings was John, whom history has judged harshly. By 1205, six years into his reign, only a fragment of the vast Angevin empire acquired by Henry II remained. John quarrelled with the Pope over the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury, eventually surrendering.

He was also forced to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, which restated the rights of the church, the barons and all in the land. John died in ignominy, having broken the contract, leading the nobles to summon aid from France and creating a precarious position for his Plantagenet heir, Henry III.

The Plantagenets

The Plantagenet period was dominated by three major conflicts at home and abroad.

Edward I attempted to create a British empire dominated by England, conquering Wales and pronouncing his eldest son Prince of Wales, and then attacking Scotland. Scotland was to remain elusive and retain its independence until late in the reign of the Stuart kings.

In the reign of Edward III the Hundred Years War began, a struggle between England and France. At the end of the Plantagenet period, the reign of Richard II saw the beginning of the long period of civil feuding known as the War of the Roses. For the next century, the crown would be disputed by two conflicting family strands, the Lancastrians and the Yorkists.

The period also saw the development of new social institutions and a distinctive English culture. Parliament emerged and grew, while the judicial reforms begun in the reign of Henry II were continued and completed by Edward I.

Culture began to flourish. Three Plantagenet kings were patrons of Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English poetry. During the early part of the period, the architectural style of the Normans gave way to the Gothic, with surviving examples including Salisbury Cathedral. Westminster Abbey was rebuilt and the majority of English cathedrals remodelled. Franciscan and Dominican orders began to be established in England, while the universities of Oxford and Cambridge had their origins in this period.

Amidst the order of learning and art, however, were disturbing new phenomena. The outbreak of Bubonic plague or the 'Black Death' served to undermine military campaigns and cause huge social turbulence, killing half the country's population.

The price rises and labour shortage which resulted led to social unrest, culminating in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

The Lancastrians

The accession of Henry IV sowed the seeds for a period of unrest which ultimately broke out in civil war. Fraught by rebellion and instability after his usurpation of Richard II, Henry IV found it difficult to enforce his rule. His son, Henry V, fared better, defeating France in the famous Battle of Agincourt (1415) and staking a powerful claim to the French throne. Success was short-lived with his early death.

By the reign of the relatively weak Henry VI, civil war broke out between rival claimants to the throne, dating back to the sons of Edward III. The Lancastrian dynasty descended from John of Gaunt, third son of Edward III, whose son Henry deposed the unpopular Richard II.

Yorkist claimants such as the Duke of York asserted their legitimate claim to the throne through Edward III's second surviving son, but through a female line. The Wars of the Roses therefore tested whether the succession should keep to the male line or could pass through females.

Captured and briefly restored, Henry VI was captured and put to death, and the Yorkist faction led by Edward IV gained the throne.

The Yorkists

The Yorkist conquest of the Lancastrians in 1461 did not put an end to the Wars of the Roses, which rumbled on until the start of the sixteenth century. Family disloyalty in the form of Richard III's betrayal of his nephews, the young King Edward V and his brother, was part of his downfall. Henry Tudor, a claimant to the throne of Lancastrian descent, defeated Richard III in battle and Richard was killed.

With the marriage of Henry to Elizabeth, the sister of the young Princes in the Tower, reconciliation was finally achieved between the warring houses of Lancaster and York in the form of the new Tudor dynasty, which combined their respective red and white emblems to produce the Tudor rose.

The Tudors

The five sovereigns of the Tudor dynasty are among the most well-known figures in Royal history. Of Welsh origin, Henry VII succeeded in ending the Wars of the Roses between the houses of Lancaster and York to found the highly successful Tudor house. Henry VII, his son Henry VIII and his three children Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I ruled for 118 eventful years.

During this period, England developed into one of the leading European colonial powers, with men such as Sir Walter Raleigh taking part in the conquest of the New World. Nearer to home, campaigns in Ireland brought the country under strict English control.

Culturally and socially, the Tudor period saw many changes. The Tudor court played a prominent part in the cultural Renaissance taking place in Europe, nurturing all-round individuals such as William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser and Cardinal Wolsey.

The Tudor period also saw the turbulence of two changes of official religion, resulting in the martyrdom of many innocent believers of both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The fear of Roman Catholicism induced by the Reformation was to last for several centuries and to play an influential role in the history of the Succession.