

---

## 5 The power of the kings of England

*Church and state • The beginnings of Parliament • Dealing with the Celts*

---

### Church and state

John's reign also marked the end of the long struggle between Church and state in England. This had begun in 1066 when the pope claimed that William had promised to accept him as his feudal lord. William refused to accept this claim. He had created Norman bishops and given them land on condition that they paid homage to him. As a result it was not clear whether the bishops should obey the Church or the king. Those kings and popes who wished to avoid conflict left the matter alone. But some kings and popes wanted to increase their authority. In such circumstances trouble could not be avoided.

The struggle was for both power and money. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Church wanted the kings of Europe to accept its authority over both spiritual and earthly affairs, and argued that even kings were answerable to God. Kings, on the other hand, chose as bishops men who would be loyal to them.

The first serious quarrel was between William Rufus and Anselm, the man he had made Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm, with several other bishops, fearing the king, had escaped from England. After William's death Anselm refused to do homage to William's successor, Henry I. Henry, meanwhile, had created several new bishops but they had no spiritual authority without the blessing of the archbishop. This left the king in a difficult position. It took seven years to settle the disagreement. Finally the king agreed that only the Church could create bishops. But in return the Church agreed that bishops would pay homage to the king for the lands owned by their bishoprics. In practice the

wishes of the king in the appointment of bishops remained important. But after Anselm's death Henry managed to delay the appointment of a new archbishop for five years while he benefited from the wealth of Canterbury. The struggle between Church and state continued.

The crisis came when Henry II's friend Thomas Becket was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Henry hoped that Thomas would help him bring the Church more under his control. At first Becket refused, and then he gave in. Later he changed his mind again and ran away to France, and it seemed as if Henry had won. But in 1170 Becket returned to England determined to resist the king. Henry was very angry, and four knights who heard him speak out went to Canterbury to murder Becket. They killed him in the holiest place in the cathedral, on the altar steps.

All Christian Europe was shocked, and Thomas Becket became a saint of the Church. For hundreds of years afterwards people not only from England but also from Europe travelled to Canterbury to pray at Becket's grave. Henry was forced to ask the pope's forgiveness. He also allowed himself to be whipped by monks. The pope used the event to take back some of the Church's privileges. But Henry II could have lost much more than he did. Luckily for Henry, the nobles were also involved in the argument, and Henry had the nobles on his side. Usually the Church preferred to support the king against the nobles, but expected to be rewarded for its support. King John's mistake forty years later was to upset both Church and nobles at the same time.

## The beginnings of Parliament

King John had signed Magna Carta unwillingly, and it quickly became clear that he was not going to keep to the agreement. The nobles rebelled and soon pushed John out of the southeast. But civil war was avoided because John died suddenly in 1216.

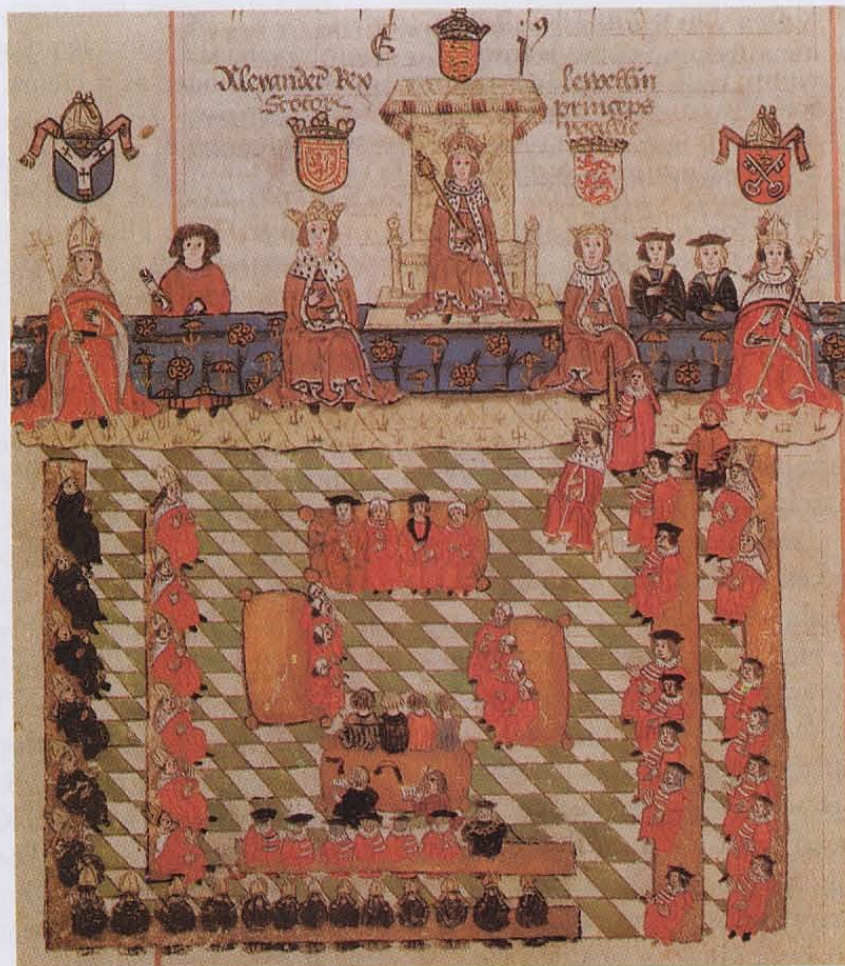
John's son, Henry III, was only nine years old. During the first sixteen years as king he was under the control of powerful nobles, and tied by Magna Carta.

Henry was finally able to rule for himself at the age of twenty-five. It was understandable that he wanted to be completely independent of the people who had controlled his life for so long. He spent his time with foreign friends, and became involved in expensive wars supporting the pope in Sicily and also in France.

Henry's heavy spending and his foreign advisers upset the nobles. Once again they acted as a class, under the leadership of Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester. In 1258 they took over the government and elected a council of nobles. De Montfort called it a *parliament*, or *parlement*, a French word meaning a "discussion meeting". This "parliament" took control of the treasury and forced Henry to get rid of his foreign advisers. The nobles were supported by the towns, which wished to be free of Henry's heavy taxes.

But some of the nobles did not support the revolutionary new council, and remained loyal to Henry. With their help Henry was finally able to defeat and kill Simon de Montfort in 1265. Once again he had full royal authority, although he was careful to accept the balance which de Montfort had created between king and nobles. When Henry died in 1272 his son Edward I took the throne without question.

Edward I's parliament. Edward sits in front of his nobles, bishops and shire knights. On his right sits Alexander, king of Scots, and on his left is Llewelyn, Prince of Wales. It is unlikely either ever sat in Edward's parliament, but he liked to think of them as under his authority. Beyond Alexander and Llewelyn sit the archbishops of Canterbury and York, and there are more bishops on the left of the picture, a reminder of the political and economic strength of the Church at this time. In the centre are woolsacks, symbolic of England's wealth.

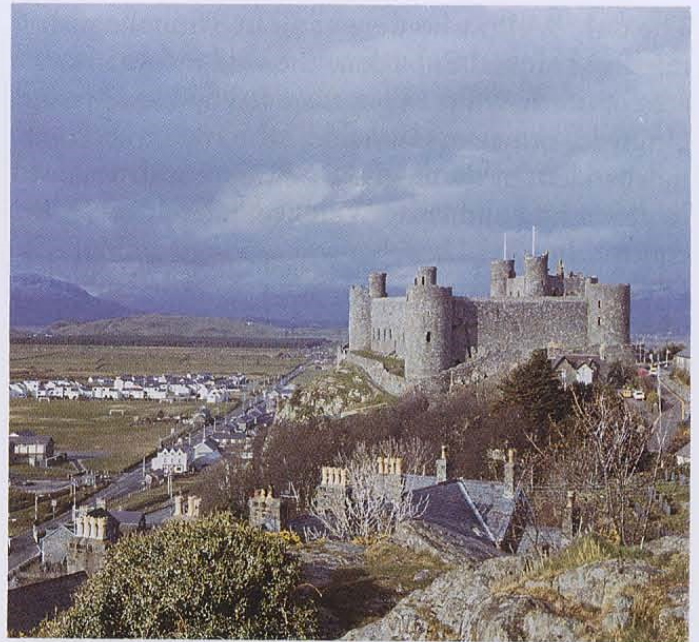


Edward I brought together the first real parliament. Simon de Montfort's council had been called a parliament, but it included only nobles. It had been able to make statutes, or written laws, and it had been able to make political decisions. However, the lords were less able to provide the king with money, except what they had agreed to pay him for the lands they held under feudal arrangement. In the days of Henry I (1100–35), 85 per cent of the king's income had come from the land. By 1272 income from the land was less than 40 per cent of the royal income. The king could only raise the rest by taxation. Since the rules of feudalism did not include taxation, taxes could only be raised with the agreement of those wealthy enough to be taxed.

Several kings had made arrangements for taxation before, but Edward I was the first to create a "representative institution" which could provide the money he needed. This institution became the House of Commons. Unlike the House of Lords it contained a mixture of "gentry" (knights and other wealthy freemen from the shires) and merchants from the towns. These were the two broad classes of people who produced and controlled England's wealth.

In 1275 Edward I commanded each shire and each town (or borough) to send two representatives to his parliament. These "commoners" would have stayed away if they could, to avoid giving Edward money. But few dared risk Edward's anger. They became unwilling representatives of their local community. This, rather than Magna Carta, was the beginning of the idea that there should be "no taxation without representation", later claimed by the American colonists of the eighteenth century.

In other parts of Europe, similar "parliaments" kept all the gentry separate from the commoners. England was special because the House of Commons contained a mixture of gentry belonging to the feudal ruling class and merchants and freemen who did not. The co-operation of these groups, through the House of Commons, became important to Britain's later political and social development. During the 150 years following Edward's death the agreement of the Commons



*Harlech Castle, one of several castles built by Edward I in order to control the north and west of Wales. The mountainous country of Snowdonia in the background was a place of safety for the Welsh rebels. While it was extremely difficult for Edward to reach the rebels in these mountains, it was also impossible for such rebels ever to capture castles as strong as Harlech. These hugely expensive castles were so strong that they persuaded the Welsh that another rising against English rule was unlikely to succeed.*

became necessary for the making of all statutes, and all special taxation additional to regular taxes.

## Dealing with the Celts

Edward I was less interested in winning back parts of France than in bringing the rest of Britain under his control.

William I had allowed his lords to win land by conquest in Wales. These Normans slowly extended their control up the Welsh river valleys and by the beginning of the twelfth century much of Wales was held by them. They built castles as they went forward, and mixed with and married the Welsh during the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A new class grew up, a mixture of the Norman and Welsh rulers, who spoke Norman French and Welsh, but not English. They all became vassals of the English king.

The only Welsh who were at all free from English rule lived around Snowdon, the wild mountainous area of north Wales. They were led by Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, prince of Gwynedd, who tried to become independent of the English. Edward was determined to defeat him and bring Wales completely under his control. In 1282 Llewelyn was captured and killed. Edward then began a programme of castle building which was extremely expensive and took many years to complete.

In 1284 Edward united west Wales with England, bringing the English county system to the newly conquered lands. But he did not interfere with the areas the Normans had conquered earlier on the English–Welsh border, because this would have led to trouble with his nobles.

The English considered that Wales had become part of England for all practical purposes. If the Welsh wanted a prince, they could have one. At a public ceremony at Caernarfon Edward I made his own baby son (later Edward II) Prince of Wales. From that time the eldest son of the ruling king or queen has usually been made Prince of Wales.

Ireland had been conquered by Norman lords in 1169. They had little difficulty in defeating the Irish kings and tribes. Henry II, afraid that his lords might become too independent, went to Ireland himself. He forced the Irish chiefs and Norman lords to accept his lordship. He did so with the authority of the pope, who hoped to bring the Irish Celtic Church under his own control.

Henry II made Dublin, the old Viking town, the capital of his new colony. Much of western Ireland remained in the hands of Irish chiefs, while Norman lords governed most of the east. Edward I took as much money and as many men as he could for his wars against the Welsh and Scots. As a result Ireland was drained of its wealth. By 1318 it was able to provide the English king with only one-third of the amount it had been able to give in 1272. The Norman nobles and Irish chiefs quietly avoided English authority as much as possible. As a result, the English Crown only controlled Dublin and a small area around it, known as “the Pale”.

The Irish chiefs continued to live as they always had done, moving from place to place, and eating out of doors, a habit they only gave up in the sixteenth century. The Anglo-Irish lords, on the other hand, built strong stone castles, as they had done in Wales. But they also became almost completely independent from the English Crown, and some became “more Irish than the Irish”.

In Scotland things were very different. Although Scottish kings had sometimes accepted the English king as their “overlord”, they were much stronger than the many Welsh kings had been. By the eleventh century there was only one king of Scots, and he ruled over all the south and east of Scotland. Only a few areas of the western coast were still completely independent and these all came under the king’s control during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In Ireland and Wales Norman knights were strong enough to fight local chiefs on their own. But only the English king with a large army could hope to defeat the Scots. Most English kings did not even try, but Edward I was different.

The Scottish kings were closely connected with England. Since Saxon times, marriages had frequently taken place between the Scottish and English royal families. At the same time, in order to establish strong government, the Scottish kings offered land to Norman knights from England in return for their loyalty. Scotland followed England in creating a feudal state. On the whole Celtic society accepted this, probably because the Normans married into local Celtic noble families. The feudal system, however, did not develop in the Highlands, where the tribal “clan” system continued. Some Scottish kings held land in England, just as English kings held lands in France. And in exactly the same way they did homage, promising loyalty to the English king for that land.

In 1290 a crisis took place over the succession to the Scottish throne. There were thirteen possible heirs. Among these the most likely to succeed were John de Balliol and Robert Bruce, both Norman–Scottish knights. In order to avoid civil war the Scottish nobles invited Edward I to settle the matter.

Edward had already shown interest in joining Scotland to his kingdom. In 1286 he had arranged for his own son to marry Margaret, the heir to the Scottish throne, but she had died in a shipwreck. Now he had another chance. He told both men that they must do homage to him, and so accept his overlordship, before he would help settle the question. He then invaded Scotland and put one of them, John de Balliol, on the Scottish throne.

De Balliol's four years as king were not happy. First, Edward made him provide money and troops for the English army and the Scottish nobles rebelled. Then Edward invaded Scotland again, and captured all the main Scottish castles. During the invasion Edward stole the sacred Stone of Destiny from Scone Abbey on which, so the legend said, all Scottish kings must sit. Edward believed that without the Stone, any Scottish coronation would be meaningless, and that his own possession of the Stone would persuade the Scots to accept him as king. However, neither he nor his successors became kings of Scots, and the Scottish kings managed perfectly well without it.

Edward's treatment of the Scots created a popular resistance movement. At first it was led by William Wallace, a Norman–Scottish knight. But after one victory against an English army, Wallace's "people's army" was itself destroyed by Edward in 1297. The Scots had formed rings of spearmen which stood firm against the English cavalry attacks, but Edward's Welsh longbowmen broke the Scottish formations, and the cavalry then charged down on them.

It seemed as if Edward had won after all. He captured Wallace and executed him, putting his head on a pole on London Bridge. Edward tried to make Scotland a part of England, as he had done with Wales. Some Scottish nobles accepted him, but the people refused to be ruled by the English king. Scottish nationalism was born on the day Wallace died.

A new leader took up the struggle. This was Robert Bruce, who had competed with John de Balliol for the throne. He was able to raise an army and defeat the English army in Scotland. Edward I gathered

another great army and marched against Robert Bruce, but he died on the way north in 1307. On Edward's grave were written the words "Edward, the Hammer of the Scots". He had intended to hammer them into the ground and destroy them, but in fact he had hammered them into a nation.

After his death his son, Edward II, turned back to England. Bruce had time to defeat his Scottish enemies, and make himself accepted as king of the Scots. He then began to win back the castles still held by the English. When Edward II invaded Scotland in 1314 in an effort to help the last English-held castles, Bruce destroyed his army at Bannockburn, near Stirling. Six years later, in 1320, the Scots clergy meeting at Arbroath wrote to the pope in Rome to tell him that they would never accept English authority: "for as long as even one hundred of us remain alive, we will never consent to subject ourselves to the dominion of the English."

*Edward I's coronation chair. The Scottish Stone of Destiny which Edward took from Scone Abbey is under the seat, a symbol of England's desire to rule Scotland. On either side of the throne stand the symbolic state sword and shield of Edward III.*

