

# Charles I of England



The second son of James VI of Scotland and Anne of Denmark, Charles was born at Fife in Scotland on 19 November 1600. His father succeeded Queen Elizabeth I and came to the throne of England as King James I in 1603. Charles was created Duke of Albany at his baptism (December 1600) and Duke of York in 1605. He was placed in the care of Lord and Lady Fyvie until the age of four, then moved to England where he was brought up in the household of Sir Robert and Lady Carey. As a child, Charles suffered from weak ankle joints (probably the result of rickets) which slowed his physical development. He was also slow in learning to speak. He outgrew these defects, except for a slight stammer which he never overcame. His education was overseen by Thomas Murray, a Scottish Presbyterian who later became Provost of Eton. Charles was a serious student who excelled at languages, rhetoric and divinity.

Charles was overshadowed by his brilliant elder brother Prince Henry, to whom he was devoted, but Henry died when Charles was 12 years old. Charles and his sister Elizabeth mourned Henry together, which created a bond between them that affected English foreign policy after Elizabeth married the Elector of the Palatinate. Henry's death made Charles heir to the throne of the Three Kingdoms: England, Scotland and Ireland. By strength of will, he overcame his physical weaknesses to become a good horseman and huntsman. He developed sophisticated tastes in the arts and earnestly applied himself to his religious devotions. Created Prince of Wales in 1616, he was instructed by King James in every aspect of ruling a kingdom. With a profound belief that Kings were appointed by God to rule by Divine Right, Charles succeeded as the second Stuart King in 1625.

Charles came to the throne amid pressure from English Protestants for intervention against Spain and the Catholic powers in the religious wars raging in Europe (the Thirty Years War, 1618-48). He allowed England's foreign policy to be directed by the unpopular Duke of Buckingham, who launched a series of disastrous military expeditions against Spain and France with the aim of indirectly assisting the Palatinate. Charles dissolved his first two Parliaments when they attempted to impeach Buckingham but he was forced to call a third because he needed funds to pursue his warlike policies. In 1628, Charles' opponents formulated the Petition of Right as a defense against the King's arbitrary use of his powers. Charles grudgingly accepted the Petition in the hope that Parliament would grant him subsidies, but in practice he ignored its provisions.

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After the assassination of Buckingham in 1628, critics in Parliament turned their attention to Charles' religious policy. He angrily dismissed his third Parliament in 1629, imprisoned several of his leading opponents, and declared his intention of ruling alone. The eleven-year period of the King's Personal Rule was also described as the "Eleven Year Tyranny". It was initially successful — during the turmoil of the civil wars, many people looked back upon it as a golden age of peace and prosperity. Charles had made peace with Spain and France by 1630. Trade and commerce grew; the King's finances were stable by 1635.

In religion, Charles favored the elaborate and ritualistic High Anglican form of worship. He appointed William Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Laud insisted upon strict compliance to the established tenets of the Church and vigorously supported the King's Divine Right. Laud also made extensive use of Star Chamber and the ecclesiastical Court of High Commission to suppress opposition from Puritans who regarded the High Church as dangerously close to Roman Catholicism. The King's marriage to the French Catholic princess Henrietta Maria also caused consternation amongst English Protestants, particularly as she was allowed to practice her religion openly and freely. In some quarters, Henrietta Maria's influence over the King and the royal children was regarded as part of an international Papist conspiracy against the Protestant faith.

Although Charles himself was high-minded and devout, his religious policies were deeply divisive and turned Puritans like Pym and Cromwell against him. In collaboration with Archbishop Laud, he insisted upon religious conformity across the Three Kingdoms. This went disastrously wrong when the Anglican liturgy and Prayer Book were forced upon the

Scottish Kirk in 1637, resulting in the creation of the Scottish National Covenant against interference in religion, and the Bishops' Wars between the two nations. In order to finance war against the Scots, Charles was obliged to recall Parliament in 1640, bringing his eleven-year personal rule to an end.

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The strength of feeling against the King's policies in Church and State resulted in vehement opposition from the Short Parliament of April 1640 and its successor the Long Parliament. Rather than attack the King himself, however, Parliament impeached and condemned to death his principal ministers Archbishop Laud and the Earl of Strafford, with Charles doing little to help them.

In November 1641, news of the Irish uprising reached London, provoking a crisis over whether King or Parliament should control the army that was needed to quell the rebellion. Against a background of riots and civil unrest, the King and Royal Family were driven from London in January 1642 following Charles' disastrous attempt to arrest the Five Members regarded as his leading opponents in Parliament. During the spring and summer of 1642, as King and Parliament appealed for the support of the nation and maneuvered to gain control of the armed forces, a violent confrontation became inevitable. King Charles raised his standard at Nottingham Castle on 22 August 1642, which was his call-to-arms and the beginning of the First Civil War. Ironically, the navy that Charles had built on the proceeds of ship-money declared for Parliament. Having lost London to the Parliamentarians, Charles set up his court and military headquarters at Oxford.

Although he lacked military experience, Charles was courageous and developed strategic skills as the war went on. He personally commanded the army that outwitted and defeated Sir William Waller in the campaign that led up to the battle of Cropredy Bridge, then pursued and defeated the Earl of Essex at [Lostwithiel](#) in the summer of 1644. But the Royalist war effort was hampered by arguments and jealousies amongst its senior officers, with Charles himself frequently indecisive or impulsive. He was easily swayed by his counselors, notably Lord Digby, who was himself conducting a personal vendetta against Prince Rupert. When the King attempted to bring government troops over from Ireland, Parliament mounted a successful propaganda campaign, raising fears of a Catholic conspiracy against English Protestants that greatly damaged the Royalist cause. The combination of Parliament's alliance with the Scottish Covenanters and the formation of the professionally-run Army brought about the defeat of the Royalists in 1645-6.

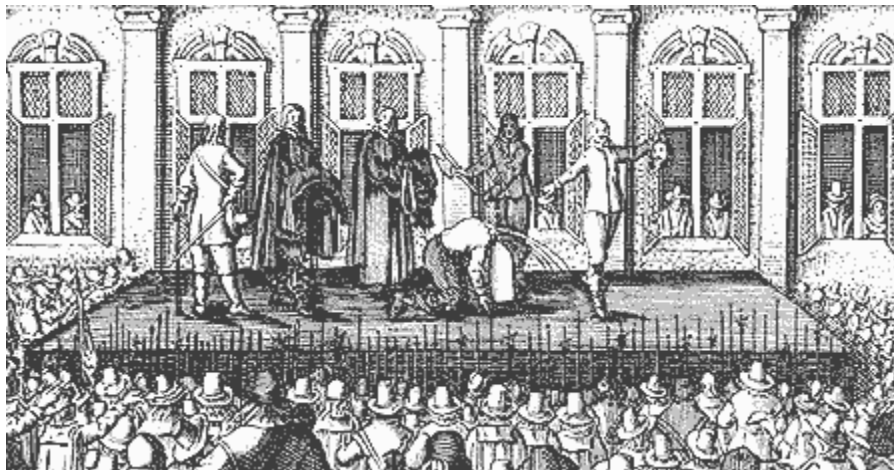
Charles fled from Oxford in April 1646 as the New Model Army approached the city. He surrendered to the Scottish army rather than to Parliament under secret terms negotiated by Cardinal Mazarin's envoy Jean de Montereul, who hoped to influence a settlement between England and Scotland that was favorable to French interests. Charles attempted to exploit divisions between the Parliamentarians and the Scots, continually involving himself in plots and intrigues with the exiled Henrietta Maria in the vain hope of gaining military help from Ireland and France. He failed to recognize the damage done to his cause in England by his association with foreigners and Catholics. After Charles refused to accept the terms offered under the Newcastle Propositions, the Scots handed him over to Parliament in January 1647. The New Model Army — which was itself in disagreement with the Presbyterian faction in Parliament — secured the King in April 1647.

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Charles was held at Hampton Court Palace, where he continued to play off the Army, Parliament and Scots against one another. He hoped that the Monarchy would be seen as a beacon of stability amongst the political turmoil, but his obstructiveness and duplicity in negotiations alienated Cromwell and others who had been anxious to reach a settlement. Believing that Army radicals were planning to murder him, Charles escaped from Hampton Court in November 1647. However, he ignored the advice of the Earl of Lauderdale to go north to Berwick where the Scots would support him and went instead to the Isle of Wight to seek the protection of the governor, Colonel Hammond, intending to take ship from there to France. Torn between loyalty to the King and his duty to Parliament, Hammond confined King Charles at Carisbrooke Castle.

Refusing to compromise over a settlement with the Army or with Parliament, Charles turned once again to the Scots. Under the terms of the Engagement signed in December 1647, Charles promised to impose Presbyterianism in England in exchange for a Scottish army to fight against Parliament. The Marquis of Argyll and the Scottish Kirk opposed the Engagement because Charles refused to take the Covenant personally or to impose it upon his subjects, but Argyll's rival the Duke of Hamilton put himself at the head of the Engager army and prepared to invade England. The Scottish invasion and simultaneous Royalist uprisings in England and Wales resulted in the short but bitterly-fought Second Civil War, culminating in Cromwell's victory over the Scots at the battle of Preston in August 1648.

Army officers were furious that Charles could deliberately provoke a second war when his defeat in the first had been so clear an indication of God's favor to the Parliamentary cause. Tired of his deceptions and intrigues, the Army denounced King Charles as the "Man of Blood". Parliament was purged of Presbyterian sympathizers and moderates in December 1648 and left with a small "Rump" of MPs that was totally dependent on the Army. Parliament appointed a High Court of Justice in January 1649 and Charles was charged with high treason against the people of England. The King's trial opened on 20 January. He refused to answer the charges, saying that he did not recognize the authority of the High Court, but he was found guilty of the charges against him and sentenced to death on 27 January 1649. The King was beheaded on a scaffold outside the Banqueting House at Whitehall on 30 January.



The King's execution shocked the whole of Europe. He was buried on 9 February at Windsor rather than at Westminster Abbey to avoid the possibility of public disorder at his funeral. Charles' personal dignity during his trial and execution had won him much sympathy. His death created a cult of martyrdom around him, which was encouraged by the publication of a book of his supposed meditations during his final months, *Eikon Basilike*. The ideal of Charles the Martyr helped to sustain the Royalist cause throughout the Commonwealth and Protectorate years. After the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, it was sanctified in the Anglican Church. To this day, wreaths of remembrance are laid on the anniversary of King Charles' death at his statue, which faces down Whitehall to the site of his beheading.