

NORMAN ENGLAND & the HOUSE of PLANTAGENET

A. The Norman Conquest of England.

The year **1066** was a turning point in English history. **William I, the Conqueror**, and his sons gave England vigorous new leadership. Norman **feudalism** became the basis for redistributing the land among the conquerors, giving England a new **French aristocracy** and a **new social and political structure**. England turned away from Scandinavia toward France, an orientation that was to last for 400 years.

William was a hard ruler, punishing England, especially the north, when it disputed his authority. His power and efficiency can be seen in the **Domesday Survey (or Domesday Book)**, a census for tax purposes, and in the **Salisbury Oath of allegiance**, which he demanded of all tenants. He appointed Lanfranc, an Italian clergyman, as archbishop of Canterbury. He also promoted church reform, especially by the creation of separate church courts, but retained royal control.

The Domesday Book was the original record or summary of William I the Conqueror's survey of England. The whole process was known as "the Description of England," The survey, in the scope of its detail and the speed of its execution, was perhaps the most remarkable administrative achievement of the Middle Ages. The survey was carried out, against great popular resentment, in 1086 by seven or eight panels of commissioners, each working in a separate group of counties, for which they compiled elaborate accounts of the estates of the king and of his tenants in chief (those who held their land by direct services to him). From these documents the king's clerks compiled a summary, which is Domesday Book.

Before William died in 1087, he gave England to his second son, William II, and Normandy to his eldest son, Robert. Henry, his third son, in due time got both—England in 1100, when William II died in a hunting accident, and Normandy in 1106 by conquest.

Henry I used his feudal court and household to organize the government. He also established the Royal Treasury or **The Exchequer**.

Henry left his throne to his daughter **Matilda**. However in 1135, his nephew, **Stephen of Blois**, seized the throne. **The years from 1135 to 1154 were marked by civil war and strife**. Disorder was widespread. The royal government Henry had built fell apart. Stephen's government lost control of much of England, and power was fragmented, decentralized and the feudal barons asserted their independence. The church, playing one side against the other, extended its authority.

B. The Plantagenet: The reign of Henry II

Matilda's son, Henry Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, succeeded, as **Henry II**, in 1154. The Angevins, especially Henry II and his sons, Richard and John, expanded royal authority. Henry ended the anarchy of Stephen's reign, banishing mercenaries and destroying private castles. He strengthened the government created by Henry I.

Most important, he developed the **common law**, administered by royal courts and applicable to all of England. It encroached on the feudal courts' jurisdiction over land and created the **grand jury**. Its success demonstrated its efficiency and the growing power of the king.

Henry attempted to reduce the jurisdiction of church courts, especially over clergy accused of crimes, but was opposed by Saint Thomas à Becket, his former chancellor, whom he had made archbishop of Canterbury. His anger at Becket's intransigence led ultimately to Becket's execution in 1170.

Henry's empire included more than half of France and lordship over Ireland and Scotland. His skill at governing, however, did not include the ability to control his sons, who rebelled against him several times. They were backed by the kings of France and by their mother, **Eleanor of Aquitaine**.

C. Richard, John and Henry III: Limits on Royal Powers

Richard I, the Lion-Hearted, was in England only briefly. He was busy fighting in the **Crusades** and later for the land lost in France during his absence, especially while he was a captive in Germany. Even during Richard's absence, however, the government built by Henry II continued to function, collecting taxes to support his wars and to pay his ransom.

At the death of Richard, **John**, inherited the throne but made bad use of it. In 1204, he lost Normandy. In 1213, after a long fight with Pope Innocent III over the naming of Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury, John capitulated and **acknowledged England to be a papal fief**. All this precipitated a clash with his barons over his general highhandedness and their refusal to follow him into war in Normandy.

The barons, led by Langton, **forced John in 1215 to accept the Magna Carta**, or Great Charter, by which he admitted his errors and promised to respect English law and feudal custom. He died the next year, still at war with the barons. Although the loss of Normandy seemed a disgrace at the time, it left England free to develop its unique institutions without outside interference.

When John died in 1216, the barons accepted his nine-year-old son as **King Henry III**. They assumed control of the government and **confirmed the Magna Carta in 1225**, as did Henry when he came of age two years later. **Thus began the tradition of royal confirmation of the Magna Carta as the fundamental statement of English law and of limited government.**

England prospered in the 12th and 13th centuries:

- Land under cultivation increased.
- sheep raising and the sale of wool became extremely important
- London and other towns became vital centres of trade and wealth, and by royal charters they acquired the right to local self-government.
- **The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were established.**
- The population probably doubled from about 1.5 million to more than 3 million.
- More than a dozen cathedrals were built, as well as scores of abbeys and parish churches, all attesting to the wealth of England and of its church. In the 1220s the friars, Franciscans and Dominicans (religious people), arrived in England, improving the quality of preaching and becoming the leading scholars in the universities.

However, Henry III was not a talented king. He quarrelled with the barons, who thought that they, rather than his favourites, should have the major offices. **In 1258, the Provisions of Oxford attempted to give control of the government to a committee of barons.** Civil war broke out in 1264, and the baronial leader Simon de Montfort came briefly to power. Montfort, however, was killed in the Battle of Evesham in 1265, and power returned to Henry and his able son, Edward.

D. Edward I and the Creation of the Parliament.

Edward I restored royal control and made several reforms:

- He limited the barons' right to hold their own courts of law.
- He restrained the vassals' right to dispose of land at the expense of their feudal lords.
- He developed English common law.
- Most important, **he used and developed Parliament**, which was essentially the king's feudal council with a new name and an enlarged membership. **The Model Parliament of 1295**, following Montfort's pattern of 1265, consisted of great barons, bishops, abbots, and representatives of counties and towns.

In 1297, to get money for his wars, Edward accepted **the Confirmation of Charters, agreeing that taxes must have the common assent of the whole realm.** This was soon taken to mean assent in Parliament. **In the following century, Parliament divided into two houses, Lords and Commons**, and made good its claim to control taxation and to participate in the making of statutes.

Edward conquered northwest Wales, ending the rule of its native princes. He built stone castles, adopted the Welsh longbow as an English weapon, and named his oldest son the Prince of Wales. He intervened in Scottish affairs, even claiming the Scottish throne. Having fought the Scots often but with little effect, Edward died in 1307 without having subdued the northern kingdom. His son, **Edward II**, gave up the campaign. In 1314, at the Battle of Bannockburn, King Robert Bruce made good Scotland's claim to

independence. One cost of the war was the long-lasting enmity of Scotland, backed by its alliance with France.

Edward II was a weak king, partly influenced by favourites and partly dominated by the ordinances of 1311 that gave the barons the ruling power. Although he freed himself of baronial rule in 1322, he was forced to abdicate in 1327. His son, Edward III, got on well with the barons by keeping them busy in France, where England continued to hold extensive territory. **In 1337** he initiated the **Hundred Years' War** to claim the French throne. The English had some initial success at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), where they used the English longbow with deadly results against the French. By 1396, however, England had lost all its previous gains. The expense of the war repeatedly forced Edward to go to Parliament for taxes, enabling it to bargain for concessions and to establish its rights and privileges.

E. Social Unrest in the 14th Century

The **Black Death** struck England in **1349**, reducing the population by as much as a third. The Statute of Labourers (1351) tried to freeze wages and prevent serfs and workers from taking advantage of the resulting labour shortage. **The Peasants' Revolt (Tyler's Rebellion)** in 1381 reflected the continuing instability. **It was a time of economic and social change in feudalism – manorial service was being commuted to cash payments, and serfdom was on the way to its downfall in the following century.**

Tyler's Rebellion was often called the Peasants' Revolt. It was an English uprising of 1381 led by an ex-soldier named Wat Tyler. Its immediate cause was popular anger over the poll tax that had been imposed to fund a war with France. The insurgents, mostly labourers stormed London on June 13 and, after much looting and killing, forced King Richard II to make several concessions, including abolition of the poll tax. The major part of the rebellion was crushed after Tyler was struck down by William Walworth, mayor of London, during negotiations on June 15. Many of the peasants were later executed and most of the concessions were revoked, although no more attempts were made to impose the poll tax.

(Adapted from Encarta & Britannica Encyclopaedias)

Important Note: **Students are expected to deepen their knowledge by taking notes during the lecture and undertaking their own research on the topic.**

Further Research: *The Crusades – The Hundred Years' War – Magna Carta – The Provisions of Oxford – The Black Death - Great Schism -*