

The English Renaissance and the Puritan Age: historical and social background

THE RENAISSANCE

The English Renaissance is a very long period which covers the whole of the 16th century and part of the 17th up to the Restoration of monarchy. It is generally divided into shorter ones: the Elizabethan Age (or the Age of Shakespeare), the Jacobean Age and The Age of Milton . There is no exact date at which the Middle Ages can be said to end and the Renaissance to begin. As always happens, the old and the new learning mixed together for several decades.

ESSENTIAL HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND: In 1485 the Civil war between the families of York and Lancaster ended with the defeat of Richard III and **Henry VII** started the **Tudor dynasty** on the throne of England. His reign lived a period of peace and prosperity. **New classes** began to emerge: The gentry (*country gentlemen*), the yeomen (*minor land-owners*), and the merchants. Henry enforced law and order, encouraged commerce and restored to the Crown much of its former prestige. He never summoned Parliament. Unlike his father, Henry VIII, followed **imperialistic dreams**. He had an immense wish to command and his ministers were hardly allowed to interfere with his decisions. His name is linked to the **English Reformation**. He did not like the spread of Lutheranism in England and defended the Catholic Church against Luther. He also published a pamphlet , *In Defence of the Seven Sacraments*. The Pope named him "*Fidei Defensor*", Defender of the Faith. His break with Rome was **not theological**. The king needed money to cover the cost of his court and of the expensive wars. He knew that the Church owned large estates and that the monasteries had treasures in gold and silver metalwork and jewellery . The church also reduced the Crown's income because people had to pay taxes to it. The occasion to the break was given by Henry's decision to divorce his wife **Catherine of Aragon**, the widow of his deceased brother Arthur and aunt to the Spanish emperor Charles V. He wanted to marry **Anne Boleyn** and asked the Pope to declare his marriage null. The Pope refused his request because he needed the support of Charles V against the Lutherans. Henry decided to divorce all the same. He proclaimed himself **Head of the Church of England** rejecting the authority of the Church of Rome. In 1534 he summoned Parliament and made it pass the "**Act of Supremacy**" by which the King was confirmed Supreme Head of the Church of England and Protestantism was recognized as the State Religion. He was now able to divorce his wife and marry Anne Boleyn. All Englishmen were required to take an oath, known as the "**Oath of Supremacy**", by which they accepted the rejection of the Pope's authority and recognized the marriage to Anne Boleyn as lawful. Those who refused to oath were condemned to death on charge of high treason. Among them the most famous was Sir Thomas More, Henry's Prime Minister and friend. Henry **closed the monasteries** and confiscated their properties giving them to protestant families that made up the new Tudor aristocracy. Through this decision the **Universities** took the place of monasteries as **seats of learning**. Henry had a **turbulent matrimonial life** and had other four wives: Jane Seymour, who died giving birth to Edward VI, Anne of Cleves, divorced, Catherine Howard, who was executed and Catherine Parr, who survived him. After Henry's death the religious struggles went on with an alternation of protestant (**Edward VI; he was only nine years old and had his uncle Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset as Protector**) and Catholic Kings(**Mary Tudor, Known as "Bloody Mary, daughter of Catherine of Aragon and the wife of King Philip II of Spain**) which witnessed first the persecution of Catholics and then of Protestants. When Mary Tudor died she left behind her a country deeply dependant on Spain, ill-governed and without religious unity.

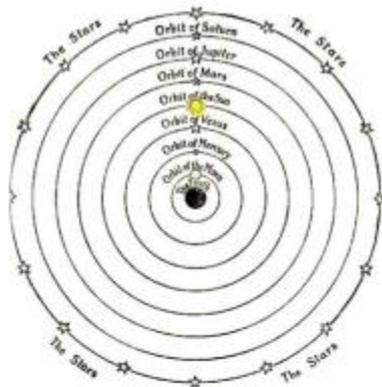
Internal peace and stability was achieved when **Elizabeth I**, the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, came to the throne (1558). She **re-established the Anglican Church** but she adopted a policy of compromise in the religious field and put the Anglican Church in the middle between the Reformed Churches and the Catholic one. A **second Act of Supremacy** (1559) restated the independence of the Church of England (*no foreign prince, State or potentate could have spiritual or temporary authority within the realm of England*) and the **Act of Uniformity** made the use of the **Book of Common Prayer** compulsory. Thanks to this policy of compromise in the religious field, Elizabeth ensured England **internal peace** and increased **wealth and commercial power**. After the discovery of America, knowing the importance of the foreign market, Elizabeth supported the new explorations thanks to the creation of a **powerful fleet**. She encouraged the growth of the Royal Navy and the birth of companies (*East India Company*) that exploited the overseas trade. Of course she had to face frictions with other States who wanted to exploit foreign commerce (*above all with Spain*). Elizabeth had only one serious **internal threat**: her Catholic cousin **Mary Stuart**, Queen of Scotland, next in succession after her. Scotland was still a Catholic country but the common people were against the corruption of the clergy. There was a Protestant revolt in Scotland and Mary had to take refuge in England. The English Catholics, who wanted to restore Catholicism, tried to make her Queen of England. She became the centre of several plots. The Commons repeatedly asked for her execution but Elizabeth refused. She kept her virtually prisoner for nineteen years. When the latest plot was discovered, Elizabeth consented to Mary's execution. After Mary's execution things went worse between Spain and England. The frictions brought to open war in 1588 when Philip II of Spain tried to invade England. The Spanish "*Invincible Armada*", a huge fleet, was defeated in the English Channel and England's victory saved her independence and increased her prestige in Europe.

When Elizabeth died, the throne went to **James VI of Scotland**. He was the son of Mary Stuart and ruled both England and Scotland as James VI of Scotland and **James I** of England. The two counties remained separate, with separate Parliaments until May 1th, **1707** when, under the terms of *The Treaty of Union*, England and Scotland became a single state, the **United Kingdom of Great Britain**, and the parliaments at Westminster and Edinburgh were replaced by a

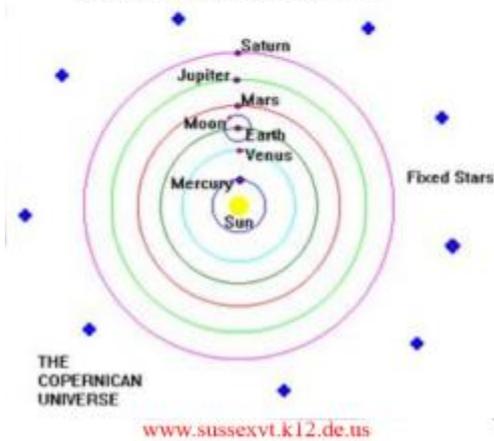
single **Parliament of Great Britain**. James was the first King of the Dynasty of the Stuarts. He was an educated man but he made many heavy mistakes (The king of France Louis XIII said of him: "*He is the wisest fool in Christendom*"). The country he inherited from Elizabeth was very difficult to be ruled because of the internal tensions in the final period of Elizabeth's reign. The system of taxation had become very inefficient, the finances of the Crown paid the cost of the war with Spain, the army was badly organized, there was a widespread corruption in bureaucracy and religion caused serious problems. The **Calvinists**, called **Puritans** in England, wanted to purify the Anglican Church. Unlike the Tudors, who had always realized that their strength came from Parliament and from the people, James believed in the "**Divine Right**" of the Kings: a king answered for his actions to God alone because he received authority from God. He believed that the powers of Parliament were a concession of the King. He called Parliament only when he was in need of money. In the religious field he insisted on the strict conformity to the liturgy of the Anglican Church. He discontented both the Puritans and the Catholics. There was a strong reaction of the Catholics who tried to blow up the king and Parliament (**the Gunpowder Plot**, nov.5th, 1605). The plot was discovered and many Catholics were put to death. Severe laws and restrictive measures were passed against all dissenters. Puritans, too, were persecuted. A group of them, known as "**The Pilgrim Fathers**", to escape persecution, sailed on board the "**Mayflower**" and landed in North America. There they founded New Plymouth, the first permanent English settlement in North America, starting the beginning of the future United States.

THE PURITAN AGE: **Charles I**, James I's son, became king in 1625. Disregarding Parliament, he tried to rule as an **absolute king**. He was in need of money to support a series of military expeditions against France to help the Huguenots, French Protestants, who tried to oppose the powerful Prime Minister Richelieu. The House of Commons refused to grant it so he dissolved Parliament trying to obtain money by illegal means and forced loans. As money was not sufficient he called a Parliament again in 1628. The Commons agreed to support the military expenses but asked the king to accept the **Petition of Rights** (*taxes had to be approved by Parliament and no man should be imprisoned without a regular trial*). The king refused and didn't call another Parliament until 1640 when he had to face religious troubles in Scotland. This Parliament is remembered as the **Short Parliament** because it only lasted one month. **Cardinal Laud**, archbishop of Canterbury, wanted that the Scottish Church had to follow the canons of the English Church and attempted to impose conformity to High Church ritual to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Parliament was summoned again in the same year (**Long Parliament**) because Charles needed money. Parliament did not grant the money and asked Charles I to give up control of the country. In 1641, a rebellion in Catholic Ireland was militarily repressed. **The first Civil war** broke out in 1642. On one side there were the Royalists or **Cavaliers**, supported by the Crown and The Anglican Church while on the other side there were the **Parliamentarians** (also called "**Roundheads**" because they wore their hair short) supported by the Puritan dissenters lead by Oliver Cromwell (*the term Puritan was applied to followers of Calvin who wanted a purer church, that is a church purified from Roman Catholic rituals and vestments*). The war ended in the victory of the Puritans. Charles I was charged with high treason and was beheaded. England became a Parliamentary Republic, **the Commonwealth**, and was ruled for some years by the Commons. Heavy taxations and a strict way of life were imposed. Everything which could sound Catholic in the rituals was abolished (*Christmas and Easter, too*). Any form of amusement such as Maypole dancing, cockfighting, bear-baiting and so on was prohibited and no games could be played on Sunday. **The theatres were closed**. People had to dress in a simple way and wore their hair cut short. In 1653 Parliament was dissolved, **Cromwell** became Lord Protector and the country was under his direct rule. The Royalists were forced to sell their estates because of Cromwell's heavy taxation and the merchant class grew in importance. **Puritan rule was brief**. People soon got tired of all that. It only lasted until 1660 when a newly summoned Parliament recalled King **Charles II**, the legitimate heir of the Stuart Dynasty from his exile. Charles restored the Church of England and granted freedom of religion to Puritans and Catholics, even if he his own assent to the **Act of Uniformity** of 1662 which stated that those who did not conform to the Prayer Book had to be driven out of the Church. In 1672 however he issued a **Declaration of Indulgence** which suspended all penal laws against Protestants and Catholic non-conformists.

The **English Renaissance** was an age of **great changes and great contrasts**: king vs Parliament; Anglicanism vs Puritanism; aristocracy vs rich middle class; refined Court manners vs Court violent amusements such as cockfighting, bull-baiting (the fighting between bulls and dogs), bear-baiting (*the fighting between bears and dogs*); wealth from the land vs wealth from trade; sheep-rearing vs peasants (*the enclosures, that is the fencing of large plots of land formerly cultivated*) and so on. **Life was hard** for the lower classes and unemployment was high. Many families lost their land and were reduced to live on begging. The slave trade, the witch hunt, the religious persecutions, the massacres in Ireland demonstrated that not everything was good in the Golden Age. To contrast poverty a **Poor Law** was passed under Elizabeth. It may be considered a first little step towards the future "*welfare State*". It stated that the parishes had to provide schools and hospitals and had to take care of orphans. It was also an age of stability and unity especially during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. England began to change from an agricultural into a commercial and industrial country. New industries were established and private enterprise was encouraged. New Merchant Companies were chartered and the famous East India Company was founded in 1600.



The Ptolemaic idea of the Universe.
The Project Gutenberg eBook of Astronomy of Today, by Cecil G. Doolittle



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Renaissance was also an Age of **scientific achievements** and discoveries of **new lands**. The development of the **new science** and of **philosophy** changed the picture of the world as seen before. The studies of Nicolaus **Copernicus**, Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler revolutionized astronomy providing a new model of the Universe. **The Ptolemaic system** was shattered: the earth was not the fixed centre of the universe; it was not the sun that revolved around the earth but the earth and the planets that revolved around the sun that was at the centre of the universe. Philosophers as Thomas **Hobbes** and Francis **Bacon** gave another blow to the traditional beliefs. They rejected the old **deductive method** in favour of the **inductive method**: general truth was not achieved proceeding from general ideas to particular facts but vice versa, thus establishing that personal experience was more important than accepted ideas. These ideas affected **religion**, too: the reformation rejected the central church authority in favour of individual conscience. The individual **reading of the Bible** was encouraged. There were new translations of the Old and New Testaments into English. Many religious movements provided their own correct text of the Bible. In 1611 the **King James' Bible**, known also as the *Authorised Version*, was adopted in the Anglican Church. It was the result of the study of a number of scholars led by Archbishop Laud. The age was characterized by a **strong national feeling**.

By the end of the century Elizabeth's England began to **decline**. With James Stuart the mood of the country changed. The religious tolerance and the enthusiasm of the Elizabethan Age were replaced by dissatisfaction and disappointment. In spite of excess and

fanaticism we may find something **positive** in the Puritan Dictatorship. Some proposals of radical reforms such as **woman's suffrage** and **free medical** treatment for the poor was a **first approach to democracy**. Groups of reformers contributed to awakening of the conscience of common people. The most important were the **Levellers** and the **Diggers**. The former asked for great participation of the people in the government while the latter were in favour of common properties against private estates.