

What kind of king was Charles I?

Key people & events

The power of the monarch

There was no question that the monarch was in charge. Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-25) both made it very clear that they ruled the country. They made the laws, they fought the wars, they appointed the top ministers and so on. However, the monarchy worked on the basis of cooperation between the monarch and the political nation.

Who were the political nation and what did they do?

The political nation was the nobles and gentry. The nobles were the very rich landowners. The gentry were the wealthy smaller landowners and also rich merchants in the towns. They were a tiny minority of the population, but they held most of the wealth and power in the kingdom. They saw themselves as the protectors of the ordinary people. They were the Members of Parliament and they collected the king's taxes. The local gentleman or merchant was usually the local magistrate. The gentry were in charge of the local militia (armed forces). They were also in charge of law and order because there was no police at this time. Their estates and businesses made them the biggest employers.

What was the court and why was it important?

The court was the gathering of people around the monarch. Wherever the monarch was, the court would also be. It included all the top nobles and officials. James I ran a very informal court. In fact he had a reputation for being too informal – he sometimes got drunk and there were lots of stories of very bad behaviour. It was quite easy for a top noble to get to talk to the king. The noble might want to do this because he was concerned about a particular law or policy that he did not agree with. James was usually prepared to explain his policies, and he often made compromises with the nobles. The court was one way that the top nobles could communicate with the king.



What was Parliament and why was it important?

Parliament was made up of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The House of Lords contained the great nobles from the richest and most powerful families. The MPs in the House of Commons were elected. Members of the gentry and wealthy merchant classes elected men from their own class to sit in Parliament.

Parliament was an important way that the political nation and the monarch could communicate. The monarch made speeches to Parliament. MPs also made speeches and wrote letters of advice to the monarch.

James I and most other monarchs preferred to rule without Parliament. However, James often ran short of money. He needed the support of MPs to agree to new taxes to raise money. He also needed the cooperation of MPs to collect these taxes. As a result, he usually agreed to listen to the concerns of MPs and accepted some of their advice.

Charles I

Charles I was James I's son. He came to the throne in 1625. He was the ruler of three kingdoms – England, Ireland and Scotland. It was a hard job to rule three kingdoms. They had different laws, churches, languages and traditions.

Charles spent most of his time in his richest and most powerful kingdom – England. His biggest problem was working with the MPs in England's Parliament. Charles believed very strongly in the Divine Right of kings. This meant that the right to rule was based on the law of God. The King was responsible to God alone therefore nobody could question the King or disobey him. Unfortunately for Charles, the political nation was not happy about such views. They expected to be able to talk to the monarch, discuss policies and reach agreements. Charles was not suited to this approach. He was a private man who did not speak much and who liked order and discipline in all aspects of his life. He never developed his father's political skill in working out compromises to tricky problems.



Charles I's court

Charles was shy, small and had a stammer. This probably made him insecure. This may help to explain why his court was very grand and formal. It was held in magnificent palaces like Whitehall, full of riches. Charles invited great painters like Anthony van Dyck to his court. The people there wore expensive, impressive clothes. There were rules about how everyone should behave. Charles also restricted the number of people who could come and talk to him. They had to have an appointment. His right-hand man, the Duke of Buckingham, controlled access to Charles.

George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham

Charles tended to rely too heavily on one or two officials he trusted. His closest minister was George Villiers, usually known as Buckingham. Buckingham used his position of power and influence with Charles to make himself and his family rich. He made sure that his friends and family were appointed to the top jobs in the government. As a result, he was widely hated by many Lords and MPs. What was worse, Buckingham was not particularly good at his job. Charles I gave him command of a military expedition against Spain in 1625. It was a failure, with many of the troops being killed by disease or made ill by cheap Spanish wine. He led another disastrous military campaign in 1627. The following year Buckingham was assassinated.