

Why did Britain become a republic?

Key people & events

Charles and his enemies

After Charles I surrendered in 1646 he was held prisoner. He was in no danger. None of his enemies wanted to harm him. None of them wanted to get rid of the monarchy. They all wanted to make some kind of agreement with him. However, they were deeply divided about what this agreement should be.

The Scots

The Scots were prepared to have Charles as king. They wanted Charles to leave the Scottish church alone and also create a new Church of England that was exactly like the Scottish Presbyterian Church.

Moderate MPs

Moderate MPs were the ones who did not hold extreme views, but were sort of middle-of-the-road in their ideas. Many MPs, probably the majority, were horrified by the damage and chaos caused by the Civil War. Some believed it was God's punishment for opposing Charles. They were now prepared to give Charles virtually all the powers he had had before the Civil War.

They did not trust the army leaders like Cromwell, many of whom were hard-line Puritans. Many moderate MPs wanted the church to stay as it was and not become more Puritan. They also wanted the army to disband because of the enormous cost of paying for it. England had never had a full time army before and people were not used to paying the heavy taxes needed to keep it. Moderates were also worried by the Levellers, and were more afraid of them than the monarchy.

Radical MPs and the army

Radicals MPs held more extreme views. They were not prepared to give the king everything he wanted. They were probably a minority, but the leaders of the New Model Army supported them. Some radical MPs were also senior



army officers, such as Oliver Cromwell. Radicals wanted a settlement with the king that would put some limits on his power. They also wanted greater freedom for groups like the Puritans to be able to worship God in their own ways. However, the radicals shared the moderates' worries about the Levellers.

Levellers

The Levellers were a small but noisy group calling for big changes in society. For example, they wanted the vote to be given to all men, not just rich gentlemen. They also wanted to put the king on trial for treason (betrayal of the country). They had a lot of support from ordinary soldiers in the army and some support in the towns.

The Second Civil War

Charles took advantage of divisions among his opponents. He knew that many people were concerned about the growing power of the army. He knew that support for him was increasing among ordinary people. They remembered the bad aspects of Charles's reign, but they also felt that rule by Parliament and the army had turned out to be even worse.

Charles kept talking to Parliament and the Scots throughout 1646 and 1647. Then in November 1647 he escaped from Hampton Court. He fled to the Isle of Wight and made an alliance with the Scots. In return, he agreed to the Scots' demands about the English church. In the summer of 1648 the Scots invaded England and Royalists in southern England also attacked the army. The Second Civil War lasted until August 1648. Oliver Cromwell defeated the Scots at Preston. Sir Thomas Fairfax defeated the Royalists in the south.

Military takeover

The Second Civil War was every bit as vicious as the first. It made the radicals determined to put Charles on trial for treason. However, Parliament was still divided. Many moderate MPs felt that putting the king on trial was wrong and would offend God. They also worried that the army was getting too powerful. They were fed up with paying heavy taxes to keep the army supplied and paid. Taxes now were far higher than they had been under Charles I. In September they opened talks with Charles to try and reach a treaty.



When the terms of this new treaty were announced many radical MPs and army leaders were disappointed.

Charles refused to accept limits on the powers of bishops (some radicals wanted to get rid of bishops altogether).

Parliament was to control the militia, the local armies, for ten years. This upset some radicals who believed that Charles should not control the militia at all.

In November the army published a 'Remonstrance' calling for the king to be put on trial. The great majority of MPs were against this. In order to get their way, the army leaders took control. In December 1648 Colonel Pride led troops into Parliament and threw out all of the MPs who did not support putting the king on trial. This event was called Pride's Purge.

The trial and execution of Charles I

The remaining MPs (known as the Rump Parliament) agreed to put Charles on trial.

He behaved with great dignity during the trial, but was found guilty, condemned to death and executed on 30 January 1649. England was now a republic, a country without a monarch at its head. In theory, it was ruled by the remaining MPs in Parliament. However, the dominant force in the land was now the army, and the key figure in the army was Oliver Cromwell.

The rise of Cromwell

The life of Oliver Cromwell in the years 1642-53 is incredible. He rose from a minor country landowner to become more powerful than any Tudor or Stuart monarch had ever been.

- 1640-2: Cromwell was elected MP for Cambridge. As a Puritan, he was a strong supporter of Pym and Hampden.
- 1642-7: When Civil War broke out Cromwell recruited his own troop of cavalry and paid for them himself. He had no previous military experience. Despite this, he turned out to be a brilliant soldier and commander.
- 1647-9: By 1647 Cromwell was one of the commanders of the New Model Army. He tried hard to reach a settlement with Charles I. According to Cromwell, Charles betrayed him and started the Second Civil War. During this war Cromwell took command of the New Model



Army. After the war Cromwell reluctantly agreed with other army commanders that Charles should be tried and executed.

Cromwell, the Levellers, Ireland and Scotland

Cromwell became increasingly powerful after the death of Charles I. His military skill, his burning religious faith and the support of the army meant that by the early 1650s he was the most powerful person in Britain.

- In May 1649 Cromwell and Sir Thomas Fairfax crushed the Levellers, who had mutinied (rebelled) in the army.
- Cromwell then took the army to Ireland and ruthlessly crushed the Irish rebels. His Irish campaigns in 1649-50 were by far the most savage of his career, probably because his Irish enemies were Catholics. No English monarch had ever managed to control Ireland so completely.
- In 1650 the Scots made Charles II (son of Charles I) their king. This threatened the republic. Cromwell took his army to Scotland, but Charles II responded by invading England. The two sides met in a great battle at Worcester in 1651. This campaign is sometimes known as the third civil war.
- The Battle of Worcester brought Scotland under the control of England. No previous English ruler had achieved this level of control over Ireland and Scotland.

Cromwell as Lord Protector

Cromwell was not just a soldier. He was a politician and he had a vision to make Britain a better place, one that God, in his opinion, would be pleased with. To do this, he was prepared to use force if he had to, but he was also clever at working out compromises and deals.

The Rump Parliament ruled England from 1649-53. The Rump MPs were afraid of radical political and religious groups and tried to crush them. Cromwell wanted a more tolerant approach to these groups, as long as they did not cause trouble. The Rump also tried to reduce the size and power of the army because it cost a lot in taxation to maintain. In 1653 Cromwell lost patience with the Rump and dismissed it. His supporters then made him Lord Protector. He ruled until his death in 1658.

Find out more

British Civil Wars, Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1638-60

<http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/index.htm>

Charles I

<http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page76.asp>

Execution of Charles I

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/state/monarchs_leaders/charlesi_execution_01.shtml

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/CharlesI_execution.htm

Oliver Cromwell

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/state/monarchs_leaders/cromwell_01.shtml

<http://www.olivercromwell.org/>

The curse of Cromwell

<http://www.irelandseye.com/aarticles/history/events/dates/cromwell.shtm>