

England in the Middle Ages

- 1. Early Middle Ages (600–1066)**
- 2. High Middle Ages (1066–1272)**
- 3. Late Middle Ages (1272–1485)**

1. Early Middle Ages (600–1066)

Political history

- At the start of the Middle Ages, England was a part of Britannia, a former province of the Roman Empire.
- The English economy had once been dominated by imperial Roman.
- At the end of the 4th century the English economy collapsed.
- Germanic immigrants began to arrive in increasing numbers during the 5th century, initially peacefully, establishing small farms and settlements.
- By the 7th century, some rulers, including those of Wessex, East Anglia, Essex, and Kent, had begun to term themselves kings, living in villa regales, royal centers, and collecting tribute from the surrounding regions; these kingdoms are often referred to as the Heptarchy.

- The Heptarchy (from the Greek ἑπτά hepta, "seven" and ἄρχω arkho, "to rule") is a collective name applied to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of south, east and central England during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, conventionally identified as seven: East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex and Wessex. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms eventually unified into the Kingdom of England.



- In the 7th century, the kingdom of Mercia rose to prominence under the leadership of King Penda.
- Mercia invaded neighbouring lands until it loosely controlled around 50 regiones covering much of England.
- Mercia and the remaining kingdoms, led by their warrior elites, continued to compete for territory throughout the 8th century.



Stained glass window in the cloister of Worcester Cathedral representing the death of Penda of Mercia

- In 789, however, the first Scandinavian raids on England began.
- Mercia and Northumbria fell in 875 and 876, and Alfred of Wessex was driven into internal exile in 878.

Statue of Alfred the Great by Hamo Thornycroft in Winchester, unveiled during the millenary commemoration of Alfred's death.

Alfred eventually won a sequence of victories against the Danes, exploiting the fear of the Viking threat to raise large numbers of men. Suppressing internal opposition to his rule, Alfred contained the invaders within a region known as the Danelaw and confirmed the kings of Wessex as the rulers of the Angelcynn, all of the English.



- Wessex expanded further north into Mercia and the Danelaw, and by the 950s and the reigns of Eadred and Edgar, York was finally permanently retaken from the Danes.

Detail of miniature from the New Minster Charter, 966, showing King Edgar



- With the death of Edgar, however, the royal succession became problematic.
- Æthelred took power in 978 following the murder of his brother Edward, but England was then invaded by Sweyn Forkbeard, the son of a Danish king.
- Attempts to bribe Sweyn not to attack using danegeld payments failed, and he took the throne in 1013.
- Swein's son, Cnut, liquidated many of the older English families following his seizure of power in 1016.

Sweyn Forkbeard

Sweyn Forkbeard was king of Denmark, England, and parts of Norway.

His name appears as Swegen in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

He was the son of King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, and the father of Cnut the Great.

In the mid-980s, Sweyn revolted against his father and seized the throne. Harald was driven into exile and died shortly afterwards in November 986 or 987.

In 1000, with the allegiance of Trondejarl, Eric of Lade, Sweyn ruled most of Norway. In 1013, shortly before his death, he became the first Danish king of England after a long effort.



- Æthelred's son, Edward the Confessor, had survived in exile in Normandy and returned to claim the throne in 1042. Edward
- was childless, and the succession again became a concern.
- England became dominated by the Godwin family, who had taken advantage of the Danish killings to acquire huge wealth.

Harold II (or Harold Godwinson; Old English: Harold Godpinson) was the last Anglo-Saxon king of England. Harold reigned from 6 January 1066 until his death at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October, fighting the Norman invaders led by William the Conqueror during the Norman conquest of England. His death marked the end of Anglo-Saxon rule over England.

When Edward died in 1066, Harold Godwinson claimed the throne, defeating his rival Norwegian claimant, Harald Hardrada, at the battle of Stamford Bridge



• **Government and society**

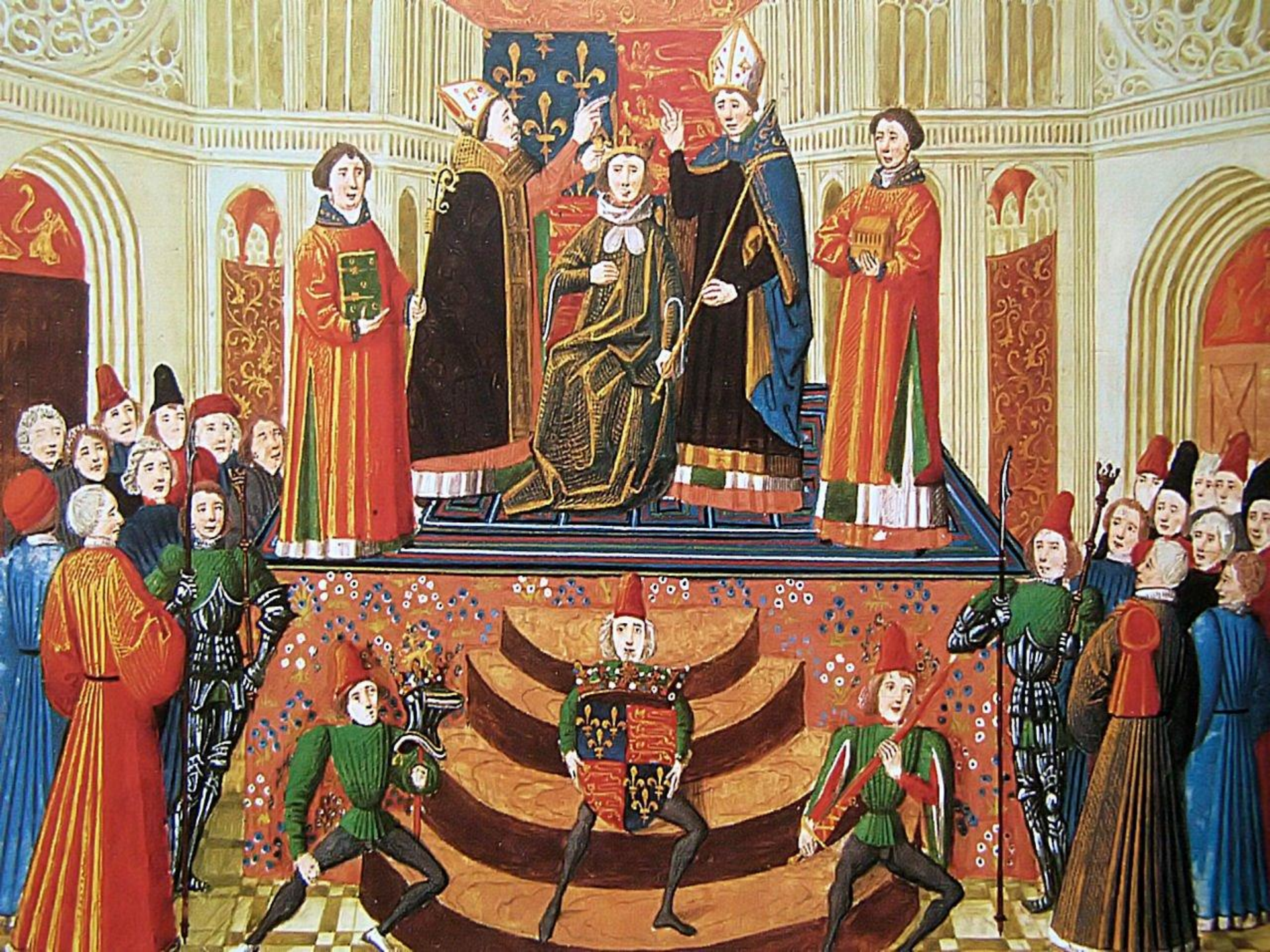
- The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were hierarchical societies, each based on ties of allegiance between powerful lords and their immediate followers.
- At the top of the social structure was the king, who stood above many of the normal processes of Anglo-Saxon life and whose household had special privileges and protection.
- Beneath the king were thegns, nobles, the more powerful of which maintained their own courts and were termed ealdormen.
- The relationship between kings and their nobles was bound up with military symbolism and the ritual exchange of weapons and armour.



- Freemen, called churls, formed the next level of society, often holding land in their own right or controlling businesses in the towns.
- Geburs, peasants who worked land belonging to a thegn, formed a lower class still.
- The very lowest class were slaves, who could be bought and sold and who held only minimal rights.



- The Anglo-Saxon kings built up a set of written laws, issued either as statutes or codes, but these laws were never written down in their entirety and were always supplemented by an extensive oral tradition of customary law.
- In the early part of the period local assemblies called moots were gathered to apply the laws to particular cases; in the 10th century these were replaced by hundred courts, serving local areas, and shire moots dealing with larger regions of the kingdom.



High Middle Ages (1066–1272)



Political history

- In 1066, William, the Duke of Normandy, took advantage of the English succession crisis to invade.
- With an army of Norman followers and mercenaries, he defeated Harold at the battle of Hastings and rapidly occupied the south of England.
- William used a network of castles to control the major centers of power, granting extensive lands to his main Norman followers and co-opting or eliminating the former Anglo-Saxon elite.

The Battle of Hastings was fought on 14 October 1066 between the Norman-French army of Duke William II of Normandy and an English army under the Anglo-Saxon King Harold Godwinson, beginning the Norman conquest of England. It took place approximately 7 miles (11 kilometres) northwest of Hastings, close to the present-day town of Battle, East Sussex, and was a decisive Norman victory.



- Some Norman lords used England as a launching point for attacks into South and North Wales, spreading up the valleys to create new Marcher territories.
- By the time of William's death in 1087, England formed the largest part of an Anglo-Norman empire, ruled over by a network of nobles with landholdings across England, Normandy, and Wales.

- Norman rule, however, proved unstable; successions to the throne were contested, leading to violent conflicts between the claimants and their noble supporters.

William II inherited the throne but faced revolts attempting to replace him with his older brother Robert or his cousin Stephen of Aumale.

In 1100, William II died while hunting.



- Despite Robert's rival claims, his younger brother Henry I immediately seized power.
- War broke out, ending in Robert's defeat at Tinchebrai and his subsequent life imprisonment.
- Robert's son Clitore remained free, however, and formed the focus for fresh revolts until his death in 1128.

- Henry's only legitimate son, William, died aboard the White Ship disaster of 1120, sparking a fresh succession crisis: Henry's nephew, Stephen of Blois, claimed the throne in 1135, but this was disputed by the Empress Matilda, Henry's daughter.

The White Ship was a vessel that sank in the English Channel near the Normandy coast off Barfleur, on 25 November 1120. Only one of those aboard survived. [a] Those who drowned included William Adelin, the only legitimate son and heir of King Henry I of England, half-sister Matilda, and his half-brother Richard. William Adelin's death led to a succession crisis and a period of civil war in England known as the Anarchy.



- Civil war broke out across England and Normandy, resulting in a long period of warfare later termed the Anarchy.
- Matilda's son, Henry, finally agreed to a peace settlement at Winchester and succeeded as king in 1154.

- Henry II was the first of the Angevin rulers of England, so-called because he was also the Count of Anjou in Northern France.
- Henry had also acquired the huge duchy of Aquitaine by marriage, and England became a key part of a loose-knit assemblage of lands spread across Western Europe, later termed the Angevin Empire.

Henry reasserted royal authority and rebuilt the royal finances, intervening to claim power in Ireland and promoting the Anglo-Norman colonization of the country.

After a final confrontation with Henry, his son Richard succeeded to the throne in 1189.

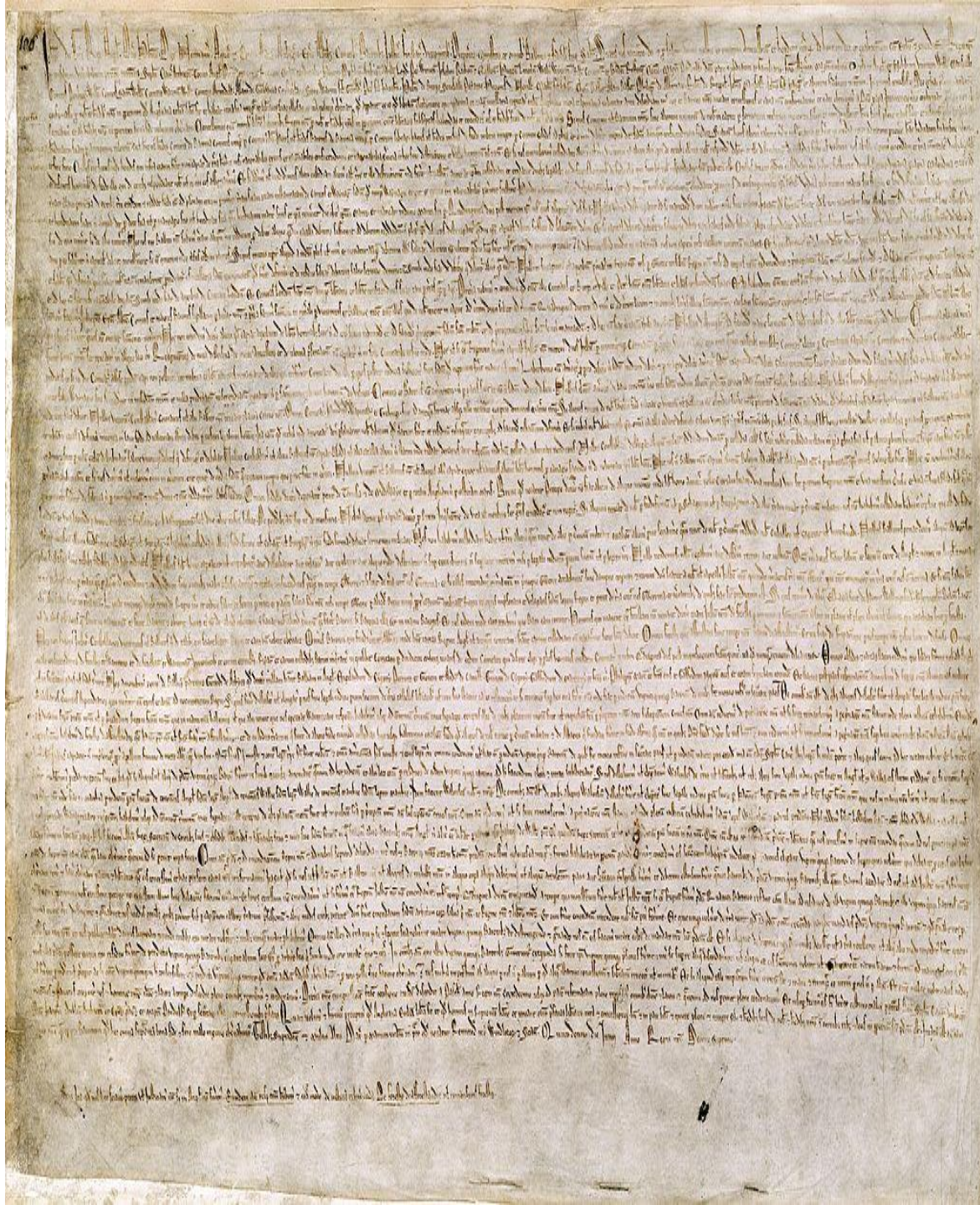


- Richard spent his reign focused on protecting his possessions in France and fighting in the Third Crusade; his brother, John, inherited England in 1199 but lost Normandy and most of Aquitaine after several years of war with France.
- John fought successive, increasingly expensive, campaigns in a bid to regain these possessions.

John's efforts to raise revenues, combined with his fractious relationships with many of the English barons, led to confrontation in 1215, an attempt to restore peace through the signing of the Magna Carta, and finally the outbreak of the First Barons' War.



The Magna Carta (originally known as the Charter of Liberties) of 1215, written in iron gall ink on parchment in medieval Latin, using standard abbreviations of the period, authenticated with the Great Seal of King John. The original wax seal was lost over the centuries. This document is held at the British Library and is identified as "British Library Cotton MS Augustus II.106"



- John died having fought the rebel barons and their French backers to a stalemate, and royal power was re-established by barons loyal to the young Henry III.
- England's power structures remained unstable and the outbreak of the Second Barons' War in 1264 resulted in the king's capture by Simon de Montfort.
- Henry's son, Edward, defeated the rebel factions between 1265 and 1267, restoring his father to power.

Government and society

- Within twenty years of the Norman conquest, the former Anglo-Saxon elite were replaced by a new class of Norman nobility, with around 8,000 Normans and French settling in England.
- The new earls (successors to the ealdermen), sheriffs and church seniors were all drawn from their ranks.
- In many areas of society there was continuity, as the Normans adopted many of the Anglo-Saxon governmental institutions, including the tax system, mints and the centralisation of law-making and some judicial matters; initially sheriffs and the hundred courts continued to function as before.
- The existing tax liabilities were captured in Domesday Book, produced in 1086.

Domesday Book is a manuscript record of the "Great Survey" of much of England and parts of Wales completed in 1086 by order of King William the Conqueror.

It was written in Medieval Latin, was highly abbreviated, and included some vernacular native terms without Latin equivalents.

The survey's main purpose was to determine what taxes had been owed during the reign of King Edward the Confessor.



- The method of government after the conquest can be described as a feudal system, in that the new nobles held their lands on behalf of the king; in return for promising to provide military support and taking an oath of allegiance, called homage, they were granted lands termed a fief or an honor.

The practice of slavery declined in the years after the conquest, as the Normans considered the practice backward and contrary to the teachings of the church.



- At the centre of power, the kings employed a succession of clergy as chancellors, responsible for running the royal chancery.
- England's bishops continued to form an important part in local administration, alongside the nobility.
- Henry I and Henry II both implemented significant legal reforms, extending and widening the scope of centralised, royal law; by the 1180s.
- King John extended the royal role in delivering justice, and the extent of appropriate royal intervention was one of the issues addressed in the Magna Carta of 1215.

- Many tensions existed within the system of government
- Property and wealth became increasingly focused in the hands of a subset of the nobility, the great magnates, at the expense of the wider baronage, encouraging the breakdown of some aspects of local feudalism.
- By the late 12th century, mobilizing the English barons to fight on the continent was proving difficult, and John's attempts to do so ended in civil war.

Civil strife reemerged under Henry III, with the rebel barons in 1258–59 demanding widespread reforms, and an early version of Parliament was summoned in 1265 to represent the rebel interests.



**• Late Middle Ages
(1272–1485)**

•Political history

- On becoming king, Edward I rebuilt the status of the monarchy, restoring and extending key castles that had fallen into disrepair.
- Uprisings by the princes of North Wales led to Edward mobilising a huge army, defeating the native Welsh and undertaking a programme of English colonisation and castle building across the region.
- Further wars were conducted in Flanders and Aquitaine.

Edward also fought campaigns in Scotland, but was unable to achieve strategic victory, and the costs created tensions that nearly led to civil war.



- Edward II inherited the war with Scotland and faced growing opposition to his rule as a result of his royal favourites and military failures.
- The Despenser War of 1321–22 was followed by instability and the subsequent overthrow, and possible murder, of Edward in 1327 at the hands of his French wife, Isabella, and a rebel baron, Roger Mortimer.
- Isabella and Mortimer's regime lasted only a few years before falling to a coup, led by Isabella's son Edward III, in 1330.

Edward II (25 April 1284 – 21 September 1327), also called Edward of Caernarfon, was King of England from 1307 until he was deposed in January 1327. The fourth son of Edward I, Edward became the heir to the throne following the death of his older brother Alphonso. Beginning in 1300, Edward accompanied his father on campaigns to pacify Scotland, and in 1306 he was knighted in a grand ceremony at Westminster Abbey. Edward succeeded to the throne in 1307, following his father's death. In 1308, he married Isabella of France, the daughter of the powerful King Philip IV, as part of a long-running effort to resolve the tensions between the English and French crowns.



Caerphilly Castle, one of the Despenser properties Roger Mortimer seized in May 1321

The Despenser War (1321–22) was a baronial revolt against Edward II of England led by the Marcher Lords Roger Mortimer and Humphrey de Bohun. The rebellion was fuelled by opposition to Hugh Despenser the Younger, the royal favourite.

After the rebels' summer campaign of 1321, Edward was able to take advantage of a temporary peace to rally more support and a successful winter campaign in southern Wales, culminating in royal victory at the battle of Boroughbridge in the north of England in March 1322. Edward's response to victory was his increasingly harsh rule until his fall from power in 1326.



- Like his grandfather, Edward III took steps to restore royal power, but during the 1340s the Black Death arrived in England.
- The losses from the epidemic, and the recurring plagues that followed it, significantly affected events in England for many years to come.
- Meanwhile, Edward, under pressure from France in Aquitaine, made a challenge for the French throne.
- Over the next century, English forces fought many campaigns in a long-running conflict that became known as the Hundred Years' War.

Edward III (13 November 1312 – 21 June 1377) was King of England from 25 January 1327 until his death; he is noted for his military success and for restoring royal authority after the disastrous and unorthodox reign of his father, Edward II. Edward III transformed the Kingdom of England into one of the most formidable military powers in Europe. His long reign of fifty years was the second longest in medieval England and saw vital developments in legislation and government—in particular the evolution of the English parliament—as well as the ravages of the Black Death.



- Edward's grandson, the young Richard II, faced political and economic problems, many resulting from the Black Death, including the Peasants' Revolt that broke out across the south of England in 1381.
- Over the coming decades, Richard and groups of nobles vied for power and control of policy towards France until Henry of Bolingbroke seized the throne with the support of parliament in 1399.

Henry of Bolingbroke (15 April 1367[1] – 20 March 1413) born at Bolingbroke Castle in Lincolnshire, was King Henry IV of England and Lord of Ireland from 1399 to 1413, and asserted the claim of his grandfather, Edward III, to the Kingdom of France. His father, John of Gaunt, was the fourth son of Edward III and the third son to survive to adulthood, and enjoyed a position of considerable influence during much of the reign of Henry's cousin Richard II, whom Henry eventually deposed. Henry's mother was Blanche, heiress to the considerable Lancaster estates, and thus he became the first King of England from the Lancaster branch of the Plantagenets.



- Ruling as Henry IV, he exercised power through a royal council and parliament, while attempting to enforce political and religious conformity.
- His son, Henry V, reinvigorated the war with France and came close to achieving strategic success shortly before his death in 1422.
- Henry VI became king at the age of only nine months and both the English political system and the military situation in France began to unravel.

- A sequence of bloody civil wars, later termed the Wars of the Roses, finally broke out in 1455, spurred on by an economic crisis and a widespread perception of poor government.
- Edward IV, leading a faction known as the Yorkists, removed Henry from power in 1461 but by 1469 fighting recommenced as Edward, Henry, and Edward's brother George, backed by leading nobles and powerful French supporters, vied for power.

The Wars of the Roses were a series of wars for control of the throne of England.

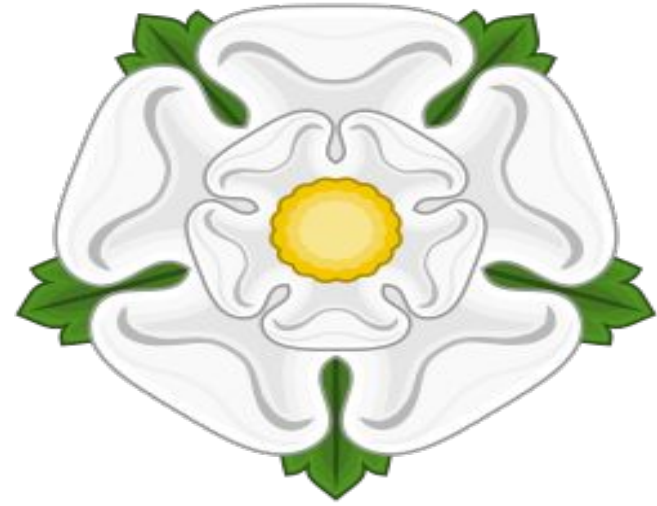
They were fought between supporters of two rival branches of the royal House of Plantagenet, those of Lancaster and York.

They were fought in several sporadic episodes between 1455 and 1487, although there was related fighting before and after this period.

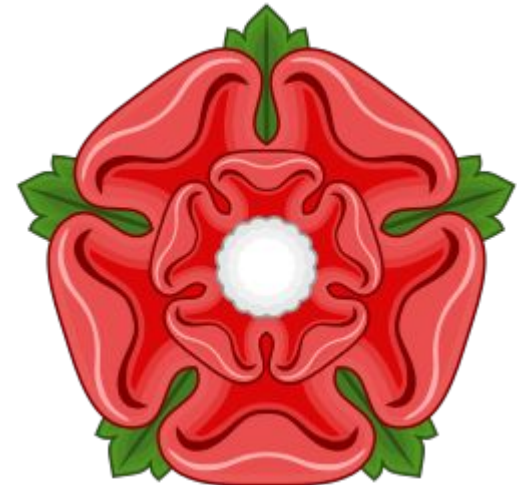
The conflict resulted from social and financial troubles that followed the Hundred Years' War, combined with the mental infirmity and weak rule of Henry VI which revived interest in Richard, Duke of York's claim to the throne.



**The White
Rose of the
House of York**



**The Red
Rose of
the House of
Lancaster**



The name Wars of the Roses refers to the heraldic badges associated with the two royal houses, the White Rose of York and the Red Rose of Lancaster. Wars of the Roses came into common use in the nineteenth century, after the publication in 1829 of *Anne of Geierstein* by Sir Walter Scott.

Scott based the name on a scene in William Shakespeare's play *Henry VI Part 1*, set in the gardens of the Temple Church, where a number of noblemen and a lawyer pick red or white roses to show their loyalty to the Lancastrian or Yorkist faction respectively.

The Yorkist faction used the symbol of the white rose from early in the conflict, but the Lancastrian red rose was apparently introduced only after the victory of Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth, when it was combined with the Yorkist white rose to form the Tudor rose, which symbolised the union of the two houses; the origins of the Rose as a cognizance itself stem from Edward I's use of a golden rose stalked proper.



- By 1471 Edward was triumphant and most of his rivals were dead.
- On his death, power passed to his brother Richard of Gloucester, who initially ruled on behalf of the young Edward V before seizing the throne himself as Richard III.
- The future Henry VII, aided by French and Scottish troops, returned to England and defeated Richard at the battle of Bosworth in 1485, bringing an end to the majority of the fighting, although lesser rebellions against his Tudor dynasty would continue for several years afterwards.

**Portrait of
Richard III of
England**



**•Government and
society**

- On becoming king in 1272, Edward I reestablished royal power, overhauling the royal finances and appealing to the broader English elite by using Parliament to authorise the raising of new taxes and to hear petitions concerning abuses of local governance.
- This political balance collapsed under Edward II and savage civil wars broke out during the 1320s.
- Edward III restored order once more with the help of a majority of the nobility, exercising power through the exchequer, the common bench and the royal household.
- This government was better organised and on a larger scale than ever before, and by the 14th century the king's formerly peripatetic chancery had to take up permanent residence in Westminster.

- Edward used Parliament even more than his predecessors to handle general administration, to legislate and to raise the necessary taxes to pay for the wars in France.]
- The royal lands—and incomes from them—had diminished over the years, and increasingly frequent taxation was required to support royal initiatives.
- Edward held elaborate chivalric events in an effort to unite his supporters around the symbols of knighthood.
- The ideal of chivalry continued to develop throughout the 14th century, reflected in the growth of knightly orders (including the Order of the Garter), grand tournaments and round table events.

- Society and government in England in the early 14th century were challenged by the Great Famine and the Black Death.
- The economic and demographic crisis created a sudden surplus of land, undermining the ability of landowners to exert their feudal rights and causing a collapse in incomes from rented lands.
- Wages soared, as employers competed for a scarce workforce. Legislation was introduced to limit wages and to prevent the consumption of luxury goods by the lower classes, with prosecutions coming to take up most of the legal system's energy and time.

- A poll tax was introduced in 1377 that spread the costs of the war in France more widely across the whole population.
- The tensions spilled over into violence in the summer of 1381 in the form of the Peasants' Revolt; a violent retribution followed, with as many as 7,000 alleged rebels executed.
- A new class of gentry emerged as a result of these changes, renting land from the major nobility to farm out at a profit. The legal system continued to expand during the 14th century, dealing with an ever wider set of complex problems.

- By the time that Richard II was deposed in 1399, the power of the major noble magnates had grown considerably; powerful rulers such as Henry IV would contain them, but during the minority of Henry VI they controlled the country.
- The magnates depended upon their income from rent and trade to allow them to maintain groups of paid, armed retainers, often sporting controversial livery, and buy support amongst the wider gentry; this system has been dubbed bastard feudalism.
- Their influence was exerted both through the House of Lords at Parliament and through the king's council.

- The gentry and wealthier townsmen exercised increasing influence through the House of Commons, opposing raising taxes to pay for the French wars.
- By the 1430s and 1440s the English government was in major financial difficulties, leading to the crisis of 1450 and a popular revolt under the leadership of Jack Cade.
- Law and order deteriorated, and the crown was unable to intervene in the factional fighting between different nobles and their followers.
- The resulting Wars of the Roses saw a savage escalation of violence between the noble leaderships of both sides: captured enemies were executed and family lands attainted.
- By the time that Henry VII took the throne in 1485, England's governmental and social structures had been substantially weakened, with whole noble lines extinguished.