

Tyrant or martyr

Charles I

1600-1649

The Stewarts had ruled Scotland from 1371 and England since 1603.

But Charles I's insistence on being obeyed in all things, and failure to adapt to a rapidly changing world, provoked such fury that it resulted in his own beheading and a period of republicanism.

As a child, he suffered problems with his speech and walking – but conquered them and eventually excelled as a rider and hunter.

After becoming king he clashed with parliament over taxation and the cost and conduct of wars.

In 1629, after dissolving parliament for the third time, he tried to rule alone.

He raised money through other means and cracked down on Puritans and Catholics – in Scotland he tried to impose an unpopular new prayer book.

In 1642 Charles tried to have several MPs arrested, raised the royal standard at Nottingham, and plunged his kingdoms into a series of civil wars.

Parliament eventually prevailed in the conflicts which tore communities and families apart in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Efforts were made to persuade the king to abdicate in favour of his son, but all negotiations to find a political settlement failed.

The Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, and group of MPs feared there would never be peace while the king lived.

Charles was tried for 'traiterously' going to war against parliament and the people.

Many see the trial as his greatest moment – scolding the court, arguing fluently and refusing to make a plea.

The king was judged guilty and went to the block claiming to be defending a God-given right to rule and insisting he stood for liberty.

He forgave his executioner, prayed and signalled the moment for his head to be cut off.

The monarchy was restored in 1660 and parliament declared Charles I a martyr and an Anglican saint.

- Read the Oxford DNB biography here: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/dnb/5143.html>.