

The Commonwealth and Interregnum 1649-1660

With the execution of Charles I in January 1649, England entered the Republican period, an **Interregnum** (between reigns). Charles II was declared King by Royalist followers. The Interregnum falls into two parts.

Part one of The Interregnum 1649 - 1653

The position of King was abolished as being "unnecessary, burdensome and dangerous". With it went the House of Lords, "useless and dangerous." They were replaced with a **Council of State**, consisting of members of the Rump Parliament and a number of army officers. England was declared a **Commonwealth**, a Republic. The power to pass laws was given to the Council of State.

The execution of Charles I had shocked, appalled and upset many people. To many Cromwell and his followers were guilty of regicide. The execution was an act of high treason. With few friends and surrounded by enemies which included Catholics, Presbyterians, Royalists and Anglicans, Cromwell and the government would find difficult times. Even amongst the government there was disagreement about what type of Republic England should have. Some favoured the country being ruled by an assembly (House of Commons), whereas others wanted rule by a single person (not a king) and an assembly.

On top of this the government faced other problems

- ▶ Ireland was in revolt
- ▶ Scotland was upset both by the execution and by the Puritans in the Council, who they thought were too tolerant of other religions.
- ▶ Prince Rupert was carrying on his own private war. He and other Royalist privateers were attacking English merchant ships.
- ▶ There was a constant threat of an invasion from Spain or France in support of Prince Charles. Both countries has been shocked by the execution.
- ▶ In The Netherlands, the Commonwealth's ambassador, Isaac Dorislaus, had been murdered by Royalists, who had then been allowed to escape by the authorities there. The United Provinces of which The Netherlands was a part, was also a Republic. Even they were shocked by the execution of Charles I.

Cromwell and his government felt uneasy, their security was threatened from many quarters. A series of stern measures were taken. In light of the above problems these measures would appear understandable.

1. All men over the age of 18 had to swear an oath of loyalty to the Commonwealth. Even members of the Council had to take the oath.
2. A new Treason Act was passed,
3. A savage censorship was passed on the Press.

Cromwell could now turn his attention to solving security problems.

1. Ireland

The Irish were revolting against the harsh rule of the Protestant landowners that had been given land there by Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. (Grant and Plant Policy). The Council gave Cromwell the task of conquering Ireland. In 1649, Cromwell arrived in Dublin with a 12,000 strong New Model Army. Cromwell spent the winter attacking towns on the east coast. Among these towns were **Drogheda** and **Wexford** where the inhabitants were massacred. 2,000 were allegedly killed in Drogheda alone, although it is suggested that this number is Catholic propaganda. Cromwell defended his actions by saying that he was doing the work of God, and further to this by the rules of war, any town refusing to surrender when given the choice, could face total slaughter of its inhabitants on capture. Either way, Cromwell felt he was justified, particularly as his actions persuaded other towns to give up without a fight, thus shortening the war, and saving lives in the long run. Cromwell returned to England in 1650.

- ▶ The Council continued to carry out the Grant and Plant policy, confiscating 2.5 million acres of land belonging to 8,000 Catholics. This land was then given out to people who had lent the government money and also soldiers who were owed pay.
- ▶ Puritan Ministers were sent to Ireland to reform the Church.
- ▶ Catholic priests if caught were exiled.
- ▶ Catholics although not forced to attend Protestant Churches, were banned from hearing mass.

This policy did much to perpetuate the bitterness between Irish Catholics and their Protestant neighbours, and is still very much alive in the troubles of modern day Ireland

2. Scotland

Scotland was ruled by intolerant Presbyterians called the Covenanters. Six days after the execution of Charles I, the Scots proclaimed Prince Charles, (Charles I's son) King Charles II, not only of Scotland but also England. Charles II, from his exile in France negotiated both with the Covenanters and Montrose an ally of his late father. However, he refused to acknowledge publicly that he had anything to do with Montrose. Montrose was eventually betrayed, handed over to the Covenanters and hanged. Charles now had to deal solely with the Covenanters who would not agree to help him unless he signed the Covenant that stated that he would agree to establish the Presbyterian religion in England and also that Charles' Catholic mother was guilty of idolatry.

Cromwell wanted to avoid a war with Scotland and tried for a peaceful settlement. He failed and in August 1650, he reluctantly invaded Scotland with 16,000 soldiers. Eventually, Cromwell's army was trapped by Alexander Leslie and the Scots army between the sea and hills at Dunbar. At the **Battle of Dunbar**, 3rd September 1650, Cromwell's New Model Army destroyed the Scots killing over 3,000 and capturing 10,000. Cromwell lost only 30 men! The defeat at Dunbar was a shock for the Covenanters.

Charles II, did not appear to be concerned about the defeat, as it gave him a chance to do things his way. He raised a fresh army of Royalists and Presbyterians and marched south into England. Once in England, he got little help, as most people were fed up with war. Cromwell eventually caught up with Charles army at Worcester. On 3rd September, 1651, Cromwell defeated Charles II at the **Battle of Worcester**. Charles managed to escape to France. His followers were shipped off (transported) to the West Indies as slaves for the sugar plantations.

Lieutenant *George Monck*, was given the task of conquering Scotland.

- ▶ Scotland lost its independence
- ▶ However, it gained 30 seats in the House of Commons
- ▶ Leading Royalists had their land taken.
- ▶ The Presbyterian Church lost its power to persecute other religions
- ▶ Taxes were heavy to pay for English soldiers.
- ▶ Government was fair and efficient.

Scotland gave Cromwell no more trouble.

3. **The Navy and the Dutch wars** 1652-4

- A strong navy was necessary to help defend against any possible invasion from abroad
- In 1650, Parliament ordered the building of 40 new ships. Naval power had been ignored since Elizabeth's I reign.
- Robert Blake, was given command of the navy. He saw off Prince Rupert and his privateers.
- In 1651, Parliament passed the Navigation Act, which stated that all goods imported into England from Asia, Africa and America had to be carried on English ships. Secondly, any goods imported from European countries had to be carried on a ship from that country or an English one.
- The "fairest mistress in the world" - trade, was to cause a war between England and the Dutch.
- All Dutch merchant ships, protected by the Dutch navy had to sail up and down the English Channel.
- At first the Dutch beat the English navy at the battle of Margate. Then in December 1652, Blake got his revenge against the Dutch Admiral Van Tromp, by winning the battle of Portland and destroying the Dutch fleet. Throughout the struggle over 1,500 Dutch merchant ships were captured.
- In 1654, the Dutch signed a treaty with Cromwell. They agreed that they would not help the Stuarts and that all Dutch ships would salute English ships in the English Channel. They agreed with the Navigation Act of 1651.
- English trade was protected and the English navy was on course to becoming a naval power of the future. Further trade treaties were made with Sweden and Portugal.

Part 2 of The Interregnum. 1653-1660

By 1652, Cromwell realised that the Council of State and particularly the Rump Parliament

- was unrepresentative of the people of England
- that many members were corrupt and were more interested in lining their pockets with money and maintaining their own power than in running the country
- that the Rump did not appear to be interested in healing the wounds left by the Civil War that it had become unpopular by passing acts which banned a) Christmas and other festivals b) Closed theatres c) Exiled Anglican and Catholic priests d) Ordinary Church services e) The Prayer Book. f) All amusements on Sundays

Cromwell also realised that the country needed a permanent constitutional settlement, so that everybody would know what would happen in the future. If Cromwell had died suddenly, nobody would have known what to do. Cromwell decided that the Rump would have to be dissolved and a new Parliament put in its place. Unfortunately, for Cromwell, the Long Parliament of 1641, had passed a law which said that only Parliament could dissolve itself. The Rump then passed an Act of Parliament which stated that in the new Parliament, all members of the Rump should have seats, and be able to vet and select any new members to see if they were fit to be in Parliament. Cromwell warned them not to pass the Act and when they refused, he entered Parliament with armed musketeers and dissolved Parliament. What Cromwell's action showed was that in reality the country was being run by the Army. Clearly, members of the Parliament were upset by Cromwell's action, particularly John Bradshaw, who reminded Cromwell that only Parliament could dissolve Parliament. Nevertheless, elsewhere there was no reaction, "not even a dog barking"

Barebones Parliament - The Rule of Saints 1653

Cromwell knew he had to find an alternative to the Rump Parliament and establish a permanent Constitutional settlement. What that alternative was, Cromwell wasn't quite sure. He had a strong, idealist belief that England would be best served by being ruled by "godly men". The Independent Puritan ministers were asked to nominate suitable men to sit in Parliament. Army leaders sifted through the names and selected 140 men, only five of who were from Scotland, six from Ireland. The Barebones Parliament (named after Praise God Barbon, one of its members) was born.

The Barebones Parliament was well meaning, but idealists do not normally make practical men, and that is what England needed most. However, they did

- abolish the Court of Chancery, which had been costly and inefficient, still waiting to hear 23,000 cases many of which were over thirty (30) years old.
- Civil marriage was introduced
- The Registration of births, marriages and deaths was introduced.

In the end the Barebones Parliament failed, government by "godly men" did not work!

- It was still unrepresentative of the people of England
- It abolished tithes, which annoyed many landowners whose support they were trying to win over.
- They were slow at paying the army's wages and back pay.

The Lord Protector 1653 - 1655

The army leaders now drew up what was called the "Instrument of Government" that was England's first written constitution.

1. Government was to be by a Lord Protector (Cromwell), a Council of State, and a Parliament.
2. Cromwell was to be Lord Protector for life. He would receive £200,000 a year for government expenses as well as extra money for the army and navy.
3. Control of the army was to be shared with Parliament.
4. Parliament would be able to raise taxes and make laws.
5. Cromwell would lose the King's right of veto, but could hold up new laws for 20 days.
6. Parliament was to meet every three years, and each session was to last at least 5 months.
7. It was to consist of 460 members with Scotland and Ireland having 30 each.
8. In the counties, every man who owned property (land and goods) worth more than £200 was given the vote.
9. In the towns this ruling did not apply and the vote was given only to members of the town's governing assembly.
10. These policy actually reduced the electorate. (40 shilling landowners disfranchised)
11. Royalists were debarred from the first four (4) Parliaments and Roman Catholics excluded forever.

Cromwell had got what he wanted a constitutional settlement, in which he was not a dictator, but rule by consent rather than force.

However, again there were no plans for the future and any changes that would occur. This Parliament was more realistic and practical but faced problems.

- The Instrument of Government did not satisfy the radical groups such as Levellers, Diggers, Fifth Monarchists and Quakers.
- it made no attempt to make peace with Anglicans and Catholics
- there was still not enough money to pay the army,
- a Royalist revolt had to be suppressed.
- it upset those in parliament who wanted to rule with just an assembly and no leader. They saw this as more control by the army and their nominee Cromwell. They wanted to change the constitution, and attempted to pass a list of 20 heresies which everybody was to reject and 20 articles of faith that all were to follow. They wanted the army reduced in size and brought under the sole command of Parliament. Cromwell wanted them to sign an oath of loyalty to the constitution. They refused and once again, Cromwell had to dissolve Parliament.

Rule of the Major-Generals 1655-1657 "Sword Rule"

There was widespread unhappiness amongst Royalist, Levellers, Diggers and Republicans and they were in alliance against "the tyrant Oliver Cromwell." Unpaid soldiers rebelled. A Royalist uprising was crushed in Scotland.

- Cromwell decided to act and divided the country into eleven districts each commanded by a Major-General with a military force. Their task was to maintain and defend the government.
- Taxes on Royalist lands were raised by 10% and were collected by the Major-Generals.
- Major-Generals were to impose "the reformation of manners"
 - a) blasphemers were to be punished
 - b) gaming, bear-bating and cock-fighting were to be banned,
 - c) Ale houses reduced in number and theatres closed.

For Cromwell, the Rule of the Major-Generals was a stop-gap measure to restore law and order, and in 1656, a year before he legally had to, he summoned another Parliament.

King Oliver? 1657

The newly elected members of Parliament drew up "The Humble Petition and Advice"

- A new constitution would be drawn up,
- There would be a House of Commons and a House of Lords. The members of the House of Lords were to be chosen by Cromwell. Cromwell was to be King.
- This was an attempt to return to the traditional type of government which everybody knew and understood.

Cromwell was tempted to take the crown, but on the advice of his army leaders and other Independents, he declined the offer. Cromwell accepted the amended "Humble Petition and Advice". Cromwell now believed he had secured a permanent constitutional settlement. In January, he moved 40 of his supporters from the House of Commons to the House of Lords. This left forty spaces in the House of Commons. New elections took place and these places were taken up by Republicans, opponents of the new constitution, men who believed that only the Rump was legitimate. The nation appeared to be telling Cromwell that his government was unacceptable. After a month, he once again dissolved Parliament. However, on 3rd September 1658, he died of illness.



Cromwell - An assessment

To many Cromwell was a monster who had committed every conceivable evil, including regicide and mass murder.

- His attempts to rule without the Rump Parliament all failed, because although he wanted to rule with consent, he always reverted to force when he met any obstacles. In the end, he confirmed what many had always believed, that England was ruled by the sword, and that the Parliaments were really just a facade.
- He failed to lead England on a path of new constitutional development.
- Bradshaw was right that Parliament was the only authority that the people would obey.

Yet he was a great soldier and statesman. His formation of the New Model Army was a masterplan. His victories at Marston Moor, Dunbar and Worcester clearly demonstrate his enormous military genius. Cromwell's major problem was that he had to serve both God and his people, and the demands of each often clashed. To his credit, he did try to satisfy both.

His son Richard, (Tumbledown Dick) was elected Lord Protector. He was well meaning but lacked his father's ability. Parliament soon started arguing amongst itself, and in 1659, Richard Cromwell resigned. Monck persuaded the Long Parliament to sit and then dissolve itself so that there could be free elections.

In April 1660, "The Convention Parliament" met and agreed to restore the Monarchy. Charles II returned to England, with Parliament recognising that his reign had started on 30th January 1649! The interregnum was over. Fourteen (14) regicides were subsequently beheaded in Royalist reprisals.

Levellers

- They were tolerant Republicans who wanted the country ruled by a Parliament.
- Two of their leaders were John Lilburne and Colonel Rainsborough.
- Lilburne was arrested, tried in the Star Chamber and flogged and then imprisoned. He was then sent into exile, after being threatened with execution if he returned. He did return, was tried but acquitted and became famously known as "Freeborn John" and became a Quaker.
- They wanted all "freeborn Englishmen" over the age of 21 to be given the vote. Notice that there is no mention of servants or women, who they believed could be too easily influenced by husbands and masters.
- They wanted all group of Puritans to worship freely,
- They wanted law courts to work more fairly and cheaply
- They had some support in London amongst shopkeepers and apprentices
- However, most of them in the army and they drew up "An Agreement of the People" which they brought before their Generals. At the Putney Debates Cromwell and his Generals, listened sympathetically to the Levellers. But, the Generals refused to support the beliefs because they felt that only people with property and wealth should have a say in the running of the country.
- In May 1649, 1,200 army Levellers revolted. Cromwell and Fairfax put the revolt down, locked prisoners up in Burford Church for three days and shot three of them whilst the others were forced to watch from the church roof.
- Gradually, the movement disintegrated, but their beliefs can be found working in Britain's democracy today.

Diggers

- They believed that poverty could be solved if land was distributed out fairly to everybody. They wanted to abolish all private property. A form of primitive communism.
- Their leader was Gerrard Winstanley.
- In 1649, a group of 30 men and women, took over common land on St George's Hill, near Walton on Thames. Here they farmed communally, digging the ground and growing, corn, carrots, parsnips and beans. They built huts for shelter, and shared their workload and produce.
- The local farmers saw them as a threat and within a year they were driven off the land by the army and their crops and shelters burnt

Fifth Monarchists

- Fanatical anarchists who believed that the world had seen the rule of 4 important monarchies, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia and Rome. The Fifth Monarchy was to be the Rule of Christ and was about to happen. They believed any other Government was evil and had to be overthrown.
- They found support amongst craftsmen in London
- On 6th Jan 1661, Thomas Venner led a group of 50 rebels to recover the regicides' head that were displayed on Westminster and London Bridge. 100 Fifth monarchists were imprisoned.
- After two days of skirmishes, Venner and 16 others were executed for murder and high treason.

Quakers

- Founded by George Fox.
- He believed in brotherly love and that there was no need for organised churches with set services.
- His followers were called "The Society of Friends". When they met they waited for inspiration from God, and once they felt that they had received it they often went into a trance, quaking and shaking with emotion.
- Fox traveled around the country preaching his beliefs.
- Many regarded the Quakers as dangerous because they refused to take oaths and treated everyone as equals, calling them thou and keeping their hats on when they met someone who was socially superior to them. This led to persecution.
- However, unlike the Levellers, Diggers and Fifth Monarchists, the Quakers have survived to this day. They continued to live peacefully, dressed simply and lived thriftily. They cared for the unfortunate and continued to treat others as equals. They were great travelers.
- One of the best known Quakers was William Penn, who founded Pennsylvania in America.