

BUNYAN'S WORLD



John Bunyan lived through a time of great upheaval. One king was beheaded (Charles I in 1649) and another was forced to give up the throne (James II in 1688). At this time England was a country where the state religion was the Anglican form of Protestantism, and where Roman Catholics and Puritans, John Bunyan being no exception, suffered persecution. Except for a brief period during the Interregnum, conformity and uniformity were enforced by the law.

Background to the Civil War

When Bunyan was born in 1628, Charles I had been on the throne for three years. Like all monarchs since the time of Henry VIII, Charles was the Head of the Church of England, but he had a Roman Catholic wife which alarmed Parliament, who worried that she might persuade the King and his heirs to become Catholic too. Charles' interest in, and support for, the high church policies of his Archbishop of Canterbury, Laud, did nothing to allay such fears. Charles had also authorised several unsuccessful military campaigns throughout Europe which resulted in both great loss of life and money. The need to raise money forced

Charles, against his will, to call Parliament to allow him to raise taxes. He was a firm believer in the Divine Right of Kings, to rule by the will of God and not the will of Parliament. Many of the opponents of the King's policies seized the opportunity to debate issues other than taxation. Eventually the dispute between King and Parliament resulted in the latter being dismissed by Royal Guards on 2 March 1629. Parliament was not to meet again for eleven years. There was nothing unusual about a long period without a parliament, but in order to raise money Charles resurrected old taxes, and applied existing ones such as ship money to new areas. The result was that when Charles was finally forced to call Parliament again in 1641, he was faced with a House of Commons with a long list of grievances. In November 1641 John Pym, a member of the House of Commons and a strict Puritan, put before Parliament a long list of what the King had done wrong. This was called the Grand Remonstrance. After long debates, this was passed, much to Charles' annoyance. Charles tried to storm Parliament to arrest Pym and four other leading rebels, but his actions were unsuccessful and damaged the King's status. His subjects were shocked by his actions,

riots broke out and he was forced, with his family, to flee from London. The Civil War broke out.

Civil War

After leaving London Charles began raising an army. On 22 August 1642, Charles moved south from York to Nottingham. His army was growing, and his nephew Prince Rupert had arrived from Holland to lead the cavalry. But Parliament controlled the main ports, the navy and the city of London. The two forces met at Edgehill, with both sides claiming victory. In 1643 the King set up camp and headquarters in Oxford. Royalists captured Bristol and other cities, but Pym, the Parliamentary leader, won the support of the Scots. The Scots army changed the war within a few months. Three Parliamentary armies besieged York, and when Prince Rupert tried to save York for the King, his army was beaten at the Battle of Marston Moor. After this battle, Oliver Cromwell was seen as one of Parliament's most important generals. In the winter of 1644-45 Parliament agreed to break up all the old local armies and form the "New Model Army" of 22,000 full-time, paid and trained men. This army met the King's forces at Naseby in Northamptonshire on 14 June 1645 and won. By 1646 the King had given himself up to the Scots and the Royalists at Oxford had surrendered. For the next two years Parliament attempted negotiations with the King. The negotiations ultimately failed when Charles escaped from captivity and raised a second army with the help of the Scots. The second Civil War followed and there were Royalist risings in Wales and the South. The Army leaders, including Cromwell, concluded that they could not trust the King and demanded that he be put on public trial. Many members of Parliament felt it was wrong to do this to a monarch but they were overpowered by the Army, led by Colonel Thomas Pride, who expelled some MPs from the House. A much smaller Parliament, called The Rump, appointed a High Court of 135 people with a remit to try the King. The trial began on 20 January 1649 and a week later Charles I was sentenced to death, a sentence carried out "by the severing of his head from his body" on 30 January 1649.

The Protectorate

Charles I was dead, and Britain was now a Republic, or Commonwealth. This meant that it was not ruled by a

monarch. However, no one knew how the country should be governed. Oliver Cromwell was now the most powerful person in the country. Cromwell faced threats of invasion from Ireland and Scotland, the first priority therefore was to make the Republic safe. After quarrelling with the remaining Parliamentary representatives, Cromwell closed Parliament in April 1653. There followed a series of experiments as Cromwell struggled to find an effective way of governing the country. A Parliament of 140 religious men, chosen from the Independent churches was called, but they suggested changes to the laws and Church that were impractical and the Parliament failed. In December 1653 Cromwell was appointed Lord Protector. He ruled with a Council of State and a new Parliament which gave the Puritans much greater religious freedom. Unfortunately Cromwell did not get on well with this Parliament, or with the rule by 11 Puritan Major-Generals that followed from 1655 to 1657. In 1657 Cromwell took sole control again of the reins of government but was to die in 1658. He was succeeded by his son Richard for one year.

The Restoration

At the beginning of 1660, England had no head of state, and there was danger of another civil war. George Monck, an army general, now made a popular decision and invited Charles II, heir to Charles I, to return to England and become king. On 25 May 1660, Charles landed in Kent and rode to London. The period of religious toleration initiated by Cromwell now came to an end. Charles' chief minister, Lord Clarendon, passed the 1662 Act of Uniformity which required that all ministers should declare publicly their assent to the Book of Common Prayer, and that those not episcopally ordained (made a priest by a bishop), should now be deprived of their livings. This legislation affected all the new religious groups that had flourished in the Interregnum. It was not until 1672 that these restrictions were lifted and even then it was not a permanent change.

The King tried to increase English power in Europe by making a secret treaty with France in 1670. He wanted help in a war against Holland. In exchange he promised religious toleration for Catholics. Many MPs were furious when they found out about the King's treaty with France. Most of them still hated Catholics. In 1673 Parliament

passed the Test Act which forced all public officials to swear that they were Protestants. Yet Charles' brother James was a closet Catholic, and heir to the throne. The King's main opponent was the Earl of Shaftesbury and his supporters became known as the Whigs. MPs who supported Charles were called Tories. The crisis ended in 1681 when Charles dismissed the MPs at Westminster; he no longer had to depend on Parliament to raise taxes following the gift of a large sum of money from Louis XIV of France. James II succeeded his brother in 1685 and with him England had its first Catholic king since Henry VIII. The following three years saw his struggle to make his kingdom a Catholic country again, against the opposition of the Whigs. Eventually James fled the country and William III of Holland, a Protestant who was married to James' daughter Mary, was invited to be King.

This period of history is also marked by two dramatic events. Both events had a devastating effect on the population of England, especially London, and were completely separate from the political upheaval of the time.

The Plague

The plague broke out in the spring of 1665. It was bubonic plague, which had also killed many people during the

Middle Ages. The disease was spread by fleas, carried by rats. There was no cure, and it swiftly spread through the crowded and dirty London streets. At night, men drove carts through the streets, shouting "Bring out your dead!" The corpses were collected and buried in the huge "plague pits" at the edge of the City. Nearly 100,000 Londoners died, and many Puritans believed that the plague was God's punishment for Charles II's wicked ways.

The Great Fire of London

On 2 September 1666, a fire started in a bakery in Pudding Lane. A spark lit a pile of hay in a nearby inn yard. The flames swept into warehouses full of oil and candle wax. By the morning, the blaze was out of control. The fire raged for five days, covering most of the City. Nine people died, and more than 13,000 houses and 97 churches were destroyed, including St Paul's Cathedral. Afterwards, Sir Christopher Wren drew up plans for new buildings. But only part of his scheme was adopted, including the new St Paul's, which stands today, with its huge dome.

Samuel Pepys was a navy clerk who kept a diary between 1660 and 1669. This gives a lively picture of London life in the 17th century, and describes both the plague and the fire.