

# Chapter 1

## Ruling Principles

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Uniting the kingdom
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**T**he British monarchy has existed continuously since the seventh century, with only one short break when the country was a republic in the mid-17th century. That's around 1,400 years, during which the monarchy changed a lot. But a number of important concerns and principles have remained at the heart of the monarchy for most of this 1,400-year period.

From the very beginning of the British monarchy, the island's rulers had to fight to gain control, to keep their kingdom united, and to stay in power, facing challenges both from local rivals and invaders from beyond Britain's shores. Many rulers became known as military leaders as a result. Once safe on the throne, they had to make sure that they had a suitable heir to take over after they died to carry on this leadership role.

But the struggles faced by a ruler weren't just military ones – paying for the monarchy became a challenge, too. To raise taxes, kings and queens had to secure the approval of at least some of their people. The people, in turn, realised that their taxability gave them some bargaining power with the monarch. They traded power for taxes, gradually curbing the authority of the monarchy and slowly tipping the balance of power in favour of the people. Eventually, the people gained power more formally through *Parliament* (the national assembly that eventually evolved into the country's legislative body), which, by the 18th century, had taken over many of the monarch's traditional powers.

Nowadays, the power of the monarch is strictly limited by the various rules, both written and unwritten, that make up the British Constitution. In other words, Britain has what is called a *constitutional monarchy*, one in which the real power is in the hands of Parliament, but in which the monarch can still advise his or her government.

## *How the United Kingdom Came to Be United*

Today, when you talk about Elizabeth II being queen of the United Kingdom, you know roughly the size of her domain. Elizabeth is queen of the island of Britain (which includes England, Wales, and Scotland), plus Northern Ireland and various surrounding islands. She's also head of state of various lands around the world, from Canada to Bermuda.



For hundreds of years, national boundaries weren't very well defined, and rulers were nearly always under threat of attack. Plenty of rivals wanted a slice of the royal action, either by taking over the whole kingdom or by grabbing part of it. These rivals came from overseas or even from the ruler's own backyard. Monarchs had to be able to defend themselves and often had to fight to show that they were in charge.

### *Enemies within*

The story of the British monarchy begins back in the fifth century. A few hundred years earlier, Britain had been part of the Roman empire, but in the early fifth century, the Romans pulled out. They left behind a power vacuum that was filled by seven or so regional rulers, each of whom reigned over a chunk of Britain. These local kings fought with each other to try to gain control of more territory, until one ruler, the king of Wessex, became the dominant power throughout England (see Chapter 4).

### **The eras of monarchy**

For convenience, historians divide the huge time span of British history into broad periods. This division is especially useful in the early centuries of British history, when kings and queens changed quite frequently, and remembering where you are in the big picture is sometimes hard. One of the most useful period labels is the *Middle Ages*, or medieval period, which runs roughly from 500 until 1500 – that is, from the time of the first kings and queens until the beginning of the Tudor dynasty. The early bit of

this period, from about 500 until 1066, is known as the *Anglo-Saxon* (or just Saxon) *period*, after the Saxon sovereigns who ruled at that time.

After the Middle Ages, historical periods are most commonly named for the reigning dynasties of the time. The most useful of these labels are the Tudor period (1485–1603), the Stuart period (1603–1714), and the Hanoverian period (1714–1901).

For hundreds of years afterwards, monarchs had to fight to keep their thrones, and the challenge often came from inside Britain itself. No wonder the Saxon kings, who ruled from the departure of the Romans in the fifth century until 1066, gained a reputation as warriors.

Monarchs have had to fight for power on their own soil at several points during British history. Here are a few examples:

- ✓ Between 1135 and 1153, Stephen, grandson of William I, fought Matilda, daughter of Henry I, and her son Henry for the English throne (see Chapter 6).
- ✓ Between 1455 and 1485, the rival families of Lancaster and York fought the Wars of the Roses (see Chapter 9).
- ✓ Between 1642 and 1649, Charles I fought the army of Parliament. When Charles was defeated, England became a republic (see Chapter 14).

So these battles over the monarchy ended up being serious stuff. As a result of these conflicts, one ruler, Charles I, was executed, and countless subjects lost their lives.

## *Ruling the waves*

Challenges to royal power also came from outside. Britain, protected from the rest of Europe by miles of rough seas, hasn't been successfully invaded that often. But the first Saxon kings arrived as invaders, and William I invaded from Normandy in 1066 (see Chapter 6).

Because William came from what is now France, his family had lands there, too. This situation began a tradition that lasted throughout the Middle Ages: English rulers also ruled portions of mainland Europe, and some kings and queens spent more time overseas than in England.

Even if many English rulers were actually French, Britain was still dear to them, and they did everything they could to defend it and hang on to it. Although attacks and invasion attempts sometimes occurred, the British navy, often combined with the changeable weather in the English Channel and North Sea, kept most challengers at bay. British sea power had another effect, too, which has changed world history and vastly increased the power of the monarchy – it helped create the British empire.

### *The British empire*

The growth of the British empire happened over a long period, as Britain's ships travelled further across the globe. The empire at its height in the 19th century was enormous, taking in vast countries and tiny islands all over the world (see Chapter 15), but Britain's monarchs ruled four major areas:

- ✔ **North America:** The British empire established lasting English settlements from the 17th century onward, eventually spreading all over North America. Although Britain lost its power over a large chunk of this territory when the United States was created in 1776, the British remained in Canada.
- ✔ **India:** English traders set up links with India in the 17th century, and the British governed much of the subcontinent by the early 19th century. Britain ruled through a series of officials called *Viceroy*s, and Queen Victoria took the title Empress of India in 1876.
- ✔ **Australia:** Explorers were followed by convicts when penal colonies were set up in Australia in the 18th century. Other settlers followed, coming to farm or mine for gold.
- ✔ **Africa:** Britain was one of several European powers that grabbed large chunks of land in Africa in the 19th century.

Being a British monarch between the 17th and 19th centuries wasn't just about ruling Britain – it was also about being the sovereign over a diverse collection of states dotted around the world.

### *The road to independence*

Today, the monarch's worldwide connections continue. A British empire no longer exists. Most places that Britain conquered between the 17th and 19th centuries are now independent. But many of them keep their links with the monarch. They do so in two main ways:

- ✔ **Dominion status:** Some of Britain's former colonies govern themselves, but hang on to the British ruler as their own head of state. This curious state of affairs is called *dominion status*. Several of Britain's largest former colonies became dominions. Canada was the first to be given dominion status, in 1867. Australia followed in 1900, New Zealand in 1907, and South Africa in 1910. South Africa now has its own elected President, but the other three nations still recognise the British sovereign as their head of state.
- ✔ **The Commonwealth:** Other former British colonies may have their own heads of state, but remain part of the *Commonwealth* – the family of allied nations that has replaced the empire. The Commonwealth was a concept that evolved gradually during the first half of the 20th century. It wasn't founded on a specific day, but developed as many of Britain's

colonies began to leave the empire after World War II. In 1958, the Commonwealth was recognised nationally when Empire Day became Commonwealth Day. The Commonwealth is held together by regular meetings between the ministers and leaders of its countries, and by the enthusiasm of the royal family, who value this extended world ‘family’ greatly. Britain and the countries of the Commonwealth also shared close trade ties, but these ties have been less strong since Britain joined the European Union.

## *Uniting the kingdom*



Today Queen Elizabeth II is the head of a state called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For short, she’s known as the queen of Britain. But monarchs haven’t always ruled the whole of Britain. The Saxon kings mostly ruled small mini-kingdoms that often added up to just one English region each. Later, some of the more ambitious kings united England. But Scotland, Wales, and Ireland had separate rulers:

- ✓ **Wales:** England and Wales were joined fairly early. Numerous English kings ruled Wales, or at least parts of it, in the Middle Ages (see Chapter 8). They often gave their eldest sons the title Prince of Wales (a title previously held by native Welsh princes) to remind the Welsh that they were under the English thumb. The English Parliament put England’s government of Wales on a formal footing in 1536 and 1543, when the Principality was divided into administrative counties and justices of the peace were appointed.
- ✓ **Scotland:** England and Scotland began to come together in a lasting union in the early 17th century, when James VI of Scotland also became King James I of England. But even then, although they had one monarch, the kingdoms of England and Scotland still had separate Parliaments and privy councils. Real union didn’t come until the Act of Union was passed in 1707 (see Chapter 14).
- ✓ **Ireland:** Union of Britain and Ireland arrived with an act of Parliament that came into force on 1 January 1801, after centuries during which Britain’s rulers had tried to dominate the island. But a strong nationalist movement in Ireland developed, and Irish nationalists and Ireland’s British rulers had a series of disputes. In 1922, there was an attempt to patch up these differences by dividing Ireland in two. The Irish Free State consisted of the southern part of Ireland, a Dominion of Britain owing an oath of allegiance to the British crown; Northern Ireland was made up of the six northern counties and remained part of the United Kingdom. Eventually, the Free State became independent and is now known as the Irish Republic.

## *Searching for an Heir*

The monarchy has always been bigger than any individual king or queen. Being part of a continuous succession of rulers is what gives monarchs their power. Kings and queens benefit from the accumulated experience (and accumulated conquests!) of those who went before them, and it's in the interests of the institution of monarch to pass the throne on to a competent heir.

As a result, having an heir has always been one of the top priorities of any ruler. In the early years, a successor was essential. Kings were usually military leaders, and a king could be killed in battle at any time. Even if times were peaceful, people didn't live as long in the Saxon and medieval periods as they do today. A ruler had to be prepared with an heir – and often a 'spare' as well, for good measure.

## *Keeping the monarchy in the family*

Most monarchies are family affairs, and the British one is no exception. Today, the crown passes from ruler to eldest son, through a clearly defined line of succession. Everyone in the royal family knows where they stand in the line to the throne.

It hasn't always been like this. The Saxons and Norman rulers usually chose their own heir and announced the lucky candidate publicly, so no one was in any doubt. But even then, the heir was usually a close family member – someone the king or queen could trust – and someone who would be good at the job. The monarch usually chose a successor from amongst their most able relatives. Later, the custom developed of handing the crown to the ruler's eldest male child, the first daughter if he had no sons, or to another close relative if he had no children at all. The girls got a bad deal in this process, and in the early centuries of British history there were very few queens. The reason girls didn't usually get to rule was because in early societies, it was the men who were expected to be the leaders – they may have to lead an army into battle, after all.



This need for an heir has meant that when historians talk about the *British monarchy*, they don't usually mean just the king or queen. They mean the whole royal family – sons, daughters, cousins, uncles, aunts, the lot. As well as a seemingly endless source of heirs, the royal family also makes up a big support network for the monarch. In the Middle Ages, the king's sons might go into battle on behalf of their father, act as ambassadors, or occupy different royal castles to spread the family's power around the kingdom. Even today, although kings no longer go into battle, 'minor royals' do all sorts of duties, from representing the country overseas to giving out awards.

The importance of this working family has meant that kings and queens have nearly always been keen to have lots of children. A medieval king sighed with relief when his queen produced a son and heir. Having a son was best, because in the Middle Ages men were seen as having the dominant role – women didn't usually get a look when it came to positions of power.

Several British rulers have hit problems, both personal and political, because they found it difficult to produce an heir:

- ✓ **Henry I** (1100–1135) was a powerful and successful medieval king who had a reputation as a just ruler. But he ran into trouble when both of his sons were killed in a shipwreck in 1120. His wife, Queen Matilda, was already dead, and when Henry remarried, he had no more children. The result? After Henry died, two rival claimants to the throne (Henry's daughter Matilda and his nephew Stephen) came forth, and a civil war ensued between the two (see Chapter 6).
- ✓ **Henry VIII** (1509–47) and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, could not produce a male heir, so he divorced her (which caused a religious crisis) and remarried. But his second wife, Anne Boleyn, gave birth to a daughter, too. Henry didn't get a son until he married his third wife, Jane Seymour (see Chapter 13).
- ✓ **Queen Anne** (1702–14) spent much of her life pregnant, but suffered a series of miscarriages and stillbirths. Her one surviving son only lived until age 11. The queen had a terrible time, and when she died, her German relatives, the Hanoverians, had to be invited to take over the throne (see Chapter 14).

So the succession was a big issue that sometimes dominated the entire reign.

## *Preparing the heir*

Just having an heir was never enough. You had to train for the job of ruler, just like any other. Royal princes usually had plenty of work to do. Back in the Middle Ages, their jobs included leading the royal army in times of war. In more peaceful times, a medieval prince might learn about leadership by running his own dukedom – in other words, becoming overlord (or boss) of a chunk of the kingdom. Being a feudal overlord meant dealing with tenants, overseeing the regional economy, settling disputes in a local court, and turning out with your men in times of war. Running a dukedom was like being a king on a small scale and was good preparation for becoming ruler.

Another way medieval kings had of preparing their eldest sons for the job of monarch was to make them Prince of Wales. Edward I invented this title in the Middle Ages for his son Edward (see Chapter 7). Since the first prince,

there have been another 20 Princes of Wales, all of whom have used the role in different ways – from acquiring leadership skills to ceremonial duties – to prepare for kingship (see Chapter 19).



Today, with the monarch playing a more symbolic part in government, the heir to the throne needs different skills. The heir still deputises for the sovereign and still keeps in touch with affairs of state. But the tasks he performs are more likely to be going on official visits or reading government briefings than going into battle. Some royals, such as the queen's second son Prince Andrew, have seen active service in war, but today's royal family would not allow the heir to the throne to risk his life on the battlefield.

## *Paying for the Monarchy*

Everyone knows that royal families are some of the richest people in the world, but where does their wealth come from? In the medieval period, the ruling king or queen owned all the land in the country. Land was the biggest kind of wealth you could have in those days, because you could enjoy the benefits of all the produce grown on the land. If you didn't want the produce, you could allocate the land to tenants and collect rents in the form of either money or services.

If a medieval ruler needed to go to war, he expected his tenants to turn out and fight for him. One of the main services that tenants gave in return for land was fighting for their sovereign. An early king's tenants were usually members of the aristocracy, and these nobles were extremely important to medieval rulers.

### **The aristocracy**

The British aristocracy began as the high-ranking class of men and women who were close to the royal family, held land and castles as direct tenants of the sovereign, and played a major part in running the country. In the Middle Ages, these nobles did everything from raising and leading royal armies to keeping the peace in their local area. They were the ruling class and stuck together.

A whole hierarchy of aristocrats developed, with titles and property inherited from one generation

to the next, like the crown itself. The nobles at the top of the hierarchy were second only to the ruler in power and prestige. The various ranks that developed are, from top to bottom, Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, and Baron. These ranks still exist today, and still include people with a lot of money and property. But hereditary nobles no longer play a central part in government.



But even medieval kings sometimes needed extra help – perhaps to hire more soldiers in a difficult war – so they had to resort to raising taxes. And that sometimes meant trouble.

## *The power of Parliament*



The main way for an early ruler to raise taxes was to call a meeting of *Parliament* – the representatives of the people – and persuade them to cough up money. Parliament evolved in the Middle Ages and from early on had two chambers:

- ✓ **The Lords**, made up of members of the nobility plus senior churchmen (archbishops and bishops).
- ✓ **The Commons**, consisting of representatives of the people of the country.

To begin with, Parliament advised the king and carried out various administrative functions. But from the 14th century onward, Parliament developed into the forum where laws were passed, petitions from the people were heard, and taxes were raised.

Getting Parliament to approve taxes wasn't always easy, because people didn't like giving up their own wealth, so Parliament often used its power to get something out of the king in return. A number of rulers had a particularly torrid time with Parliament:

- ✓ **Richard II** (1377–99) had a series of disputes with Parliament over raising money for his wars with France and his lavish lifestyle at court. Parliament ended up appointing a special committee of advisers who had the power to control pretty much everything the king did (see Chapter 8).
- ✓ **James I** (king of England 1603–25) believed that he ruled by divine right, and that Parliament had no business interfering in his decisions. He ignored Parliament as much as he could, but fell foul of them when he had to ask them to raise taxes (see Chapter 14).
- ✓ **Charles I** (1625–49) had the biggest problem of all with Parliament. Eventually, the supporters of Parliament and those on the king's side went to war to decide who should rule the country. The Parliamentarians won this civil war, and for a few years, the country was a republic (see Chapter 14).

Parliament could become a useful brake on royal power – 'we'll give you the money if you agree to reduce your power or let us pass such-and-such a law'. But Parliament could also be the total undoing of a monarch who didn't know how to manage it properly.

## *The taxman cometh*

As time went by, taxes became more regularised. Rulers hung on to specific kinds of taxes so that they could have a regular income. Two examples were the duties that were charged on goods that were traded and the taxes that were charged on people's income. Neither one was very popular – surprise, surprise!

- ✓ **Excise duties:** *Excise duties* – charges on goods that were bought and sold – became a common way of raising money in the 17th century. By this period, the feudal system of land in return for services had disappeared, and royal feudal rights were finally abolished in 1660. The rulers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century seized on excise duties as a way of raising money. All kinds of goods were taxed – for example, salt, candles, beer, and coal. Because most of these items were necessities, ordinary people hated the taxes and feared the excise men who collected them. But in the 18th century, up to half of government income came from these kinds of taxes.
- ✓ **Income tax:** The other important kind of tax was tax on peoples' income. *Income tax* was first introduced in 1798 and was collected frequently in the 19th century. In the 20th century, it came to be seen as a way of achieving social equality, by taxing the rich to help the poor. But 19th-century rulers and governments saw it more simply as a way of paying for crises, such as the Crimean War.

## *Sinister ministers*

By the 17th century, government was paid for by taxes, and taxes were raised by Parliament. The most powerful people in Parliament were, and still are, the *government ministers*, the senior politicians of the political party that has the majority in Parliament. The ministers formulate policies and devise new laws. Monarchs sometimes found them hard to work with because they wielded power in the way that the crown once did.

Not surprisingly, one minister usually took the lead, and as time went by, this leader was recognised and given a title – the *Prime Minister*. The first Prime Minister was Robert Walpole, a politician who entered Parliament in 1700 and was Prime Minister from 1721 to 1742 during the reigns of George I and George II.

The Prime Minister became the person who formed the link between Parliament and the monarch. From the 18th century until today, rulers and Prime Ministers have had regular meetings, during which the Prime Minister outlines policies, new laws, and political issues, and the monarch offers advice.

## *Being Good to the People*

The monarchy has never simply been about grabbing power, keeping hold of it, and squeezing the people for taxes. In all historical eras, Britain has had kings and queens who have tried to bring benefits to their people and their realm.

### *Holy kings!*

Being a king has always meant being closely connected to religion. The earliest ceremonies in which a person was made a monarch usually took place in church and involved a senior priest anointing the new ruler with holy oils. In the Middle Ages, new rulers started to have coronation ceremonies, in which the process of becoming king or queen was marked by putting on the crown. But coronations still took place in church and usually involved anointing, too.

These sacred rituals still form part of the coronation, and they indicate that being a king isn't just about worldly power. It's also about being virtuous, worshipping God, and trying to do good by your people.

Of course, the sacred coronation rites didn't mean that every king or queen was a paragon of virtue. Far from it. But good behaviour was expected, and the bishops – who were powerful men in their own right in the Middle Ages – had something to say if a king stepped off the straight and narrow.

### *I serve*

Today, monarchs are still expected to bring benefits to their realm and not just to use power for its own sake or for the good life it brings. In the 20th century, rulers such as George VI and Elizabeth II took this obligation very seriously, doing charitable work and using their position to help people in need. Elizabeth II continues charity work into the 21st century.



Modern monarchs see the charitable side of their role as a public duty, and this attitude seems set to continue into the near future. The current Prince of Wales is very well aware of the tradition that he has inherited from all the previous Princes of Wales. In a curious twist of irony, this rich and privileged prince has two words in Old German inscribed beneath his coat of arms. They are *Ich dien*, meaning I serve.

