

Monarchy in England

Before the Renaissance, Britain had been occupied by many other countries. This is why so many different languages were spoken. From 43 to 420 CE, Rome occupied Britain, which introduced the Latin language to the region. Then France invaded in 1066, which is why French was spoken at court. It was not until 1485 that the English language began to gain prestige. The reason 1485 was so important is because the people of Britain began to shift how they thought about themselves in relation to other countries, but how did they get to that shift?

Britain was engaging in a civil war from 1455 to 1485, called the War of the Roses. In this war there were two royal families, the Lancaster's and the Plantagenet's, fighting for power. The Lancaster House was represented by the red rose, and the Plantagenet House (also called the House of York) was represented by the white rose. Eventually, the war was won by Henry Tudor of House Lancaster and was crowned King Henry VII. To build some sort of peace, he married Elizabeth of York to unite the two houses. From then on the Tudor rose was red and white to symbolize this joining of houses.

King Henry the VII ruled from 1485 to 1509 and was succeeded by his son Henry VIII. Henry VIII had six wives and sired three children, all of which individually ruled England for some time after Henry VIII's death in 1547. Below is the order in which people ruled England.

1485 to 1509: King Henry VII

1509 to 1547: King Henry VIII (Henry VII's son)

1547 to 1553: King Edward VI (Henry VIII's son)

1553 to 1558: Queen Mary I (Henry VIII's eldest daughter)

1558 to 1603: Queen Elizabeth I (Henry VIII's youngest daughter)

1603 to 1625: King James I

It is important to note that Queen Elizabeth I never married and therefore was the last of the Tudor's to rule England. Also, there was no freedom of speech during the Tudor reign which made citizens fear for their safety. They had to be mindful of what they were saying at all times. This also made it difficult and extremely dangerous for citizens to gain power because in order to gain power, one had to be close to the monarch. During King James I's rule, England and Scotland were united.

Religion in England

In the early 1500's Catholicism was England's main religion. When the religion was challenged by people such as Martin Luther in Germany, Henry VIII defended the religion. Henry VIII's passion for the religion was praised by Pope Leo X, who called Henry the Defender of the Faith.

When Queen Katherine of Aragon (Henry's first wife and mother to Queen Mary I) could no longer birth living heirs, Henry broke away from the Catholic church so that he could divorce his wife and marry Anne Boleyn (mother of Queen Elizabeth I). This Reformation, which took place in the 1530's, created the Church of England and made King Henry VIII head of the Church. The Church of England is a Protestant church. It was also at this time that Pope Clement VII excommunicated Henry VIII for leaving the Catholic Church.

When Queen Mary I took over the throne in 1553, she reinstated the Catholic religion as England's main religion. This only makes sense because her mother (a Spanish princess) and her husband (King of Spain) were devout Catholics. During her reign, Mary burned 280 non-Catholics at the stake which is how she gained her nickname, Bloody Mary.

The country then went back to the Protestant religion when Queen Elizabeth I took rule in 1558. During this time, being Catholic was illegal. Citizens practicing the religion or going to mass were fined and/or imprisoned. By following her father's footsteps in outlawing the Catholic religion, she gained the attention of Pope Gregory XIII who stated that it would not be a mortal sin for someone to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. While it is no longer illegal to practice other religions in England, the main religion is still Protestant.

History of Theatre in Britain

After Rome no longer ruled Britain (after 400's), the Catholic Church determined how theatre was run in the country. There is little to no information about theatre in Britain from the years 600 to 1000, and there was no organized theatre at all throughout the Middle Ages. It was the Catholic Church that made theatre reemerge. The Catholic Church created liturgical dramas, or performances, that accompanied the mass held in the Latin language. Since most people did not speak Latin (unless you were of the royal family or attending court), these performances during mass helped people understand what was happening or being said.

As the Middle Ages continued, plays began to get more sophisticated and were held outside of the church. These plays were called Mystery Plays because even though they were not held at church, they were biblical in nature and about Christ through plays. These Medieval English Mystery Plays were:

- Religious
- Amateur (performed by unprofessional actors)
- Performed in towns across England, mainly at festivals
- Seasonal - these plays were played over and over again during specific times of the year.

Medieval English Mystery Plays were made illegal by Henry VIII when he broke from the Catholic Church and created the Church of England. Thereafter, theatre became professional in the way that they are now.

Early Modern Drama in Britain

After outlawing Medieval English Mystery Plays, Henry VIII helped in instating Early Modern Drama. Early Modern Drama was:

- Professional (actors were paid for their work because people paid to see it)
- Centered in London
- Secular (not religious because of Henry outlawing the Catholic religion!)
- Year-Round (plays were produced all the time, which was why there was a high demand for new ones to be written)

In the town of Shortage, a new building was being built in 1576 by a man named James Burbage. This building was called The Theatre. It was three stories tall, one hundred feet across, roofless, and accommodated two to three thousand people. While it was being built, people thought it was going to be a location for bear-baiting, but it was actually the first building to be purposefully built as a theatre in England. This is important to note because most theatres during this time period were located within buildings that used to belong to the Catholic Church. At the end of the 1500's, the lease was up on the land, so the theatre was dismantled. However, the timber/wood for this building was used to build The Globe in 1598, which is the theatre in which Shakespeare put on his plays. The Globe is located south of the River Thames.

About twenty-five thousand people per week went to London to see plays. Certain companies only played in certain theatres, which is why Shakespeare's plays were only performed at the Globe. Playwrights had to be aware of the restrictions set in place by the monarch. No play could talk about a specific person or discuss anything or anyone in the government.

Shakespeare's Life

The Tudors were always paranoid that someone was out to get them. It could be a feeling left over from the War of the Roses, when everyone had to look over their shoulders for people trying to take the throne. In Queen Elizabeth's case, she was most likely afraid that someone was going to take her life because of the many policies she set in place, one of which had the Pope claiming that killing her would not be a mortal sin. This paranoia had Queen Elizabeth hire spies to document almost everything going on in England, including the life of William Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare was born in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, about a hundred miles north of London. His father was a glover and a civic leader in the town. In his leather-working trade, Shakespeare's father engaged in illegal wool trading, which was documented by one of Queen Elizabeth's spies. Eventually, Shakespeare's father was let go, but the ordeal created financial problems for the family. It took a long time for Shakespeare to be financially stable again. The charges against his father also kept the family from being granted a coat of arms. It wasn't until Shakespeare became a famous playwright that the coat of arms was granted because of his personal achievements.

In his childhood, Shakespeare attended the King's New School, a grammar school taught exclusively in Latin. It was here that Shakespeare was introduced to his love of theatre. He was exposed to Roman plays such as Plautus's *Amphitryon* and *Menaechmi*. Shakespeare's family is also thought to have been secret Catholics, which at the time was illegal. This could explain the years that Shakespeare disappeared from society. When he surfaces back up, he is married to a woman named Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than Shakespeare and three months pregnant at the time of their wedding.

William Shakespeare started writing plays sometime before 1594, with the first being *Henry VI*. By 1599 he owned one-tenth of the Globe, which was mainly owned by the company The King's Men. Throughout his career, Shakespeare was able to gain the financial stability he had before his father was arrested. By the time he died in 1616 he was well off and had an entire estate to give to his wife and children as well as the entertainment he has provided us for centuries.