

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### SOCIETY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

##### Population

The population of England and Wales was approximately five and a half million in 1600. It had been rising steadily throughout the sixteenth century as the population became increasingly resistant to the recurring attacks of plague that had halved the population between 1349 and 1480. The vast majority of the population lived in the countryside, the poorest probably never travelling outside their village. There were cities, the major cities being Norwich, Bristol, York and Newcastle and one city that was huge by European standards – London. Already London was growing at a rate that dwarfed the other cities. In 1600 London's population was 250,000; by 1640 it was 400,000 – the largest city in Europe. The next largest city in England, Norwich, only had a population of perhaps 20,000. The size and wealth of London became a matter of envy and concern to the merchants of the 'outports' such as Hull and Lynn, who saw the great city, with its immensely rich companies of merchants, 'eating up the trade of the whole kingdom'.

##### Life expectancy

Life expectancy was low for the vast majority of the population – those just 'making a living' as farm labourers or 'cottagers' (smallholders), for whom the average age of death was thirty. As child deaths were very high indeed, this figure gives a rather distorted view. In fact anyone who survived until fourteen had a chance of living until forty. For the more wealthy, with a better diet and rather better hygiene, life expectancy was higher. However, medical knowledge was, by our standards, all but non-existent. Death was a constant presence in every family; childbirth was particularly dangerous so children and wives were very much at risk.

4 The Coming of the Civil War 1603–49

##### Agriculture

For the majority of the population living in the countryside, life was bound up with the seasons and they lived by agriculture. Even England's main export, cloth, was based on the grazing of sheep. Poor weather in the summer months could mean starvation for many because, if the harvest failed, they were at risk in the following winter. However, in the seventeenth century demand for agricultural produce increased. The reason for this was the growth in population explained above. The growing cities needed to be fed and money was invested in improving river transport. The result was that landowners could get their goods to market more easily and were therefore encouraged to invest in agricultural improvements. Investment in agriculture and the increase in profits led to an increase in the number of large farms. Smaller farms were joined together to form farms of over 600 acres in size.

##### Industry

For centuries wool had been England's main export. By the seventeenth century England was not exporting much raw wool, but cloth that was 'unfinished'; it still needed to be dyed and 'dressed' – finished – to be made into clothes. This finishing was done in the Netherlands. New lightweight cloths that were suitable for warmer climates were also being developed. Although England exported some other goods, such as tin and leather, cloth remained the single most important export, with thousands of people, from shepherds, farmers, weavers and cloth buyers through to merchants, depending on it.

However, the cloth industry, like other sectors of the English economy, faced real problems at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

- **The guild system.** Industrial production was held back by the guild system. Guilds were organisations that made the rules for each trade, whether it be weaving, spinning or plumbing. The main effect of the guild system was to restrict those making specific goods so as to keep the price of those goods high. However, the result of this guild system was that it restricted output.

#### KEY TERM

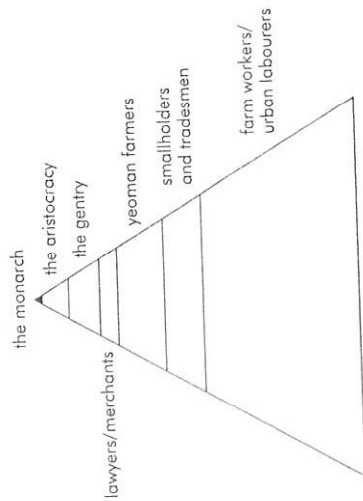
##### The merchant companies

**of London** Trade to various parts of the known world was largely in the hands of the great city companies, who had royal charters (documents of rights granted by the king) to trade to various areas. The major companies were: the Merchant Adventurers trading to northern Europe, the Levant Company to Turkey, the Eastland Company to the Baltic, the Russia Company to Russia, and the East India Company to the Far East and India. The charters these companies had gave them a monopoly of trade. Merchants who were not members of these companies could not trade in these areas. Of course, merchants who were not members of the great chartered companies resented their hold on trade.

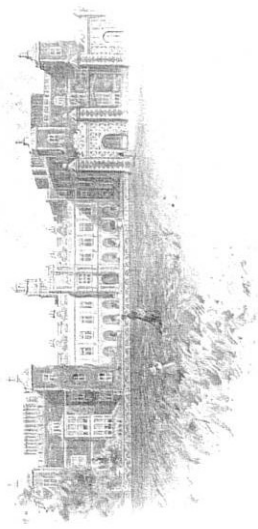
- Poor communication and transport. Although some rivers, including the Ouse, Nene and Thames, were made navigable in parts during the seventeenth century, it still took a long time to get goods to market. Most roads were tracks that became almost impassable in wet weather and harsh winters.

### Social class

Social class in seventeenth-century England was very much more clearly defined and separated than today. In theory society was still hierarchical.



**Aristocracy.** The most important group in seventeenth-century society was the aristocracy – those with large estates whose families could, in most cases, be traced back for hundreds of years. They had inherited titles – Earl, Duke, Lord, Baron – which usually passed down to the eldest son. The eldest member of an aristocratic family sat in the House of Lords. Traditionally they had commanded armies, attended court and advised kings, and they arranged marriages among themselves – unless the family was going through a bad time financially, when they might arrange a marriage with the daughter of a rich merchant. They lived in the great houses that one can still see across England – Hardwick, Hatfield, Burleigh, Haddon, Knole, Holdenby – and they were surrounded by servants who ‘lived in’, some great houses having as many as fifty living-in servants.



Hatfield House, built by Robert Cecil, Earl of Salsbury.

Knights were a special case. Unlike the aristocracy with their hereditary titles, they were given their title of Sir by the monarch, usually for distinguished service or bravery, and the title did not pass down to the next generation. Those who held this title were very proud of it because it marked them off from the rest of the population.

**Gentry.** Below the aristocracy were the gentry – ‘gentlemen’. The gentry are less easy to define. In theory, they had to be of ‘old families’ which did not have a hereditary title of honour, and they had a coat of arms, which showed that their family was ‘old’. The gentry varied in wealth. Some could rival their local aristocrats in the number of acres they owned; others were considerably less wealthy. The gentry in the prosperous agricultural areas, such as the south, the midlands and East Anglia, were far richer than the gentry of the less prosperous north and west. The mark of the gentry family was that it did no work; like the aristocracy they let their land out to tenant farmers or had an ‘estate manager’ who organised the farms. Like the aristocracy, they were anxious to keep their landholding intact, so only the eldest son inherited the land; younger sons became lawyers or merchants. The gentry were vital to the running of the country outside London.

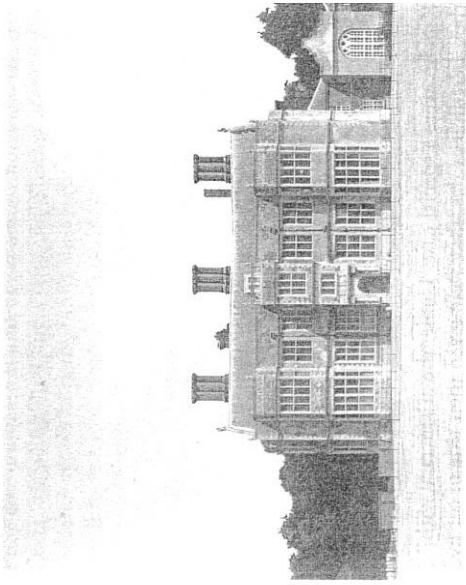
They served as **Justices of the Peace** and sheriffs. The leading gentry in each county got their status from being militia officers, Justices of the Peace, Deputy Lieutenants

### KEY TERM

#### Justices of the Peace (JPs)

were the unpaid administrators of the countryside. They undertook many of the following tasks:

- carrying out the instructions of the Royal Council
- trying criminal cases
- keeping law and order



Felbrigg, Norfolk, 1620.

(the organisers of the militia) and, the highest honour of all, Members of Parliament.

The militia was the only military force in England – except for a few garrisons at key points such as Portsmouth and Dover, and the Royal Guards around the court. There were very few professional soldiers in England. In theory, every man could be called upon by the monarch to help defend the country in time of war. Not everyone could be equipped and trained, even on a once-a-year meeting (muster). Therefore only some people were in the militia companies that were organised by each county. The Deputy Lieutenants were in charge of the militia in the counties, and the other leading gentlemen of each county were captains in charge of local companies. The weapons and gunpowder were often stored in the local parish church. Most militia companies were not at all well trained or equipped.

**Lawyers and merchants.** The lawyers and merchants were, in theory, below the gentry in terms of social status, although some were the younger sons of gentry. In fact, many lawyers and merchants were as rich as the leading gentry, or even aristocrats, and married into gentry or aristocratic families. Some of the great City of London

**The poor.** The vast majority of the population were the rural poor – rural labourers who perhaps just had a cottage garden, or the urban workers in industries such as glass making, leather tanning and pottery. Some of these, if they were skilled workers, were in demand and could live quite well; others lived 'from hand to mouth'. There were specialised trades in the countryside, such as blacksmithing and weaving, but the latter was dependent on economic conditions. Occasionally economic depression caused widespread distress. In the 1620s and again in 1640 the wool trade was affected by recession and the weavers suffered.

### The role of women

Seventeenth-century society was dominated by males. In theory, the head of the family exercised complete power over his children, and, by today's standards, women appear to have been oppressed. Legally, women were second-class citizens.

- Women could not, in theory, own or inherit land and most marriages among the upper classes – aristocracy, gentry and merchants – were arranged.
- Women could not vote and were regarded as inferior to men in every respect.

In practice, some women overcame these legal handicaps and exercised considerable influence. Despite the convention of arranged marriage, in the late sixteenth century, women such as Bess of Hardwick were able to make their 'own luck' by marrying the men they wished to, holding property and, through their forceful personalities, having real power. One of the most common themes in early-seventeenth-century plays is the daughter who defies her parents and marries for love. Moreover, the diaries of some seventeenth-century gentry and yeomen show that their wives had considerable power in the home and were able to exert influence over their husbands. During the Civil War, some women played an active role commanding troops defending their castles while their husbands were away fighting. Even the poorer women played an important role in the economic life of the country, particularly in the weaving industry – 40 per cent



A seventeenth-century family: the Spencers at Charlecote Park.

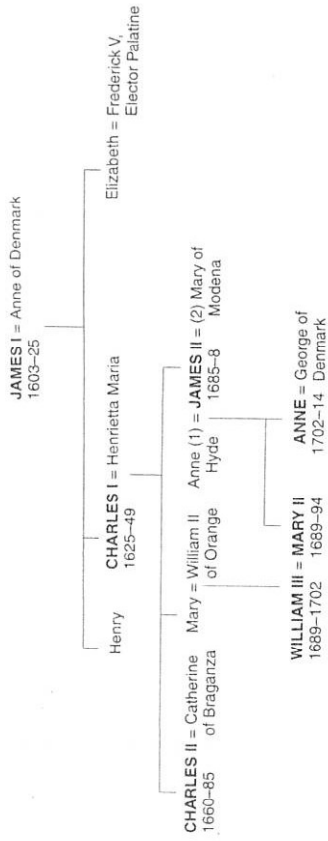
of weaving was done by women. However, in general it would be true to say that women were regarded as inferior and the 'weaker vessel'.

## THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICS

### The Crown

At the head of the political system was the monarch, with far greater powers than kings or queens have today.

**The divine right of kings.** There were many important ideas associated with the monarchy, the most significant being the 'divine right of kings'. During the sixteenth century ideas that had been around for several hundred years became more clearly expressed. The divine right of kings was an idea that appealed to monarchs all over Europe – monarchs who wished to extend their authority. In simple terms, the idea was this:



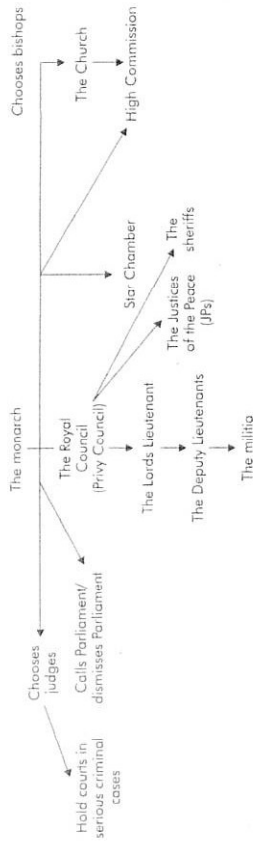
Part of the Stuart family tree. Monarchs are shown in bold capitals and the dates indicate their reigns.

- Kings were God's representatives on earth. Their power came from God and therefore could not be challenged.
- God's will. Those who believed in the divine right of kings believed that kings were carrying out God's will on earth, so again their decision could not be challenged.

**The difference between Charles and James.** Both James I and Charles I were, like all seventeenth-century monarchs, believers in the divine right. This belief is important because it helps to explain many of their decisions and actions. However, there was a difference between the two. Although James believed that he had been chosen by God to be king, he did not challenge the laws of the land or Parliament with this idea in mind. Charles was not so careful.

**The royal prerogative.** In English political theory, the king ruled as well as reigned. In other words, he had wide powers that could not, or should not, be challenged. Although the king had these powers, it did not mean that many people believed in the divine right of kings. The wide-ranging rights and powers that the monarch held were known as the 'royal prerogative'. The prerogative included the right:

- to give out titles of honour,
- to choose the Royal Council (the king's advisers),
- to conduct foreign policy,
- to appoint judges,



Note: Both Star Chamber and High Commission were Prerogative Courts where the monarch could sit, but usually members of the Royal Council judged.

### The structure of government.

- to call and dismiss parliaments,
- to collect certain taxes,
- to issue royal proclamations (instructions) on certain matters.

The monarch was head of the Church, so he appointed bishops and decided on the way the Church of England held its ceremonies and on its doctrines (beliefs). The monarch also had the right to declare war or peace, and was commander of the armed forces. In addition, the day-to-day running of the country was in the monarch's hands: the Royal Council would issue instructions to the JPs and Deputy Lieutenants in the counties under the royal seal, which gave legal authority to them.

**Limits to royal power.** There were limits to royal power, however, and these limits were a matter for debate throughout the first forty years of the seventeenth century.

### KEY THEMES

'Live of his own' meant that the monarch should not collect taxes in peacetime to support the royal household.

**Royal proclamations** were new laws declared by the monarch without reference to Parliament.

- In theory, the monarch should live of his own.
- **Royal proclamations** could not override 'common law' – the laws of England that had grown up over hundreds of years.
- The 'subject' (the citizen) of England had rights in law that the monarch could not overrule.

Many of the clashes between kings and parliaments in this period were about the rights of the subject as against the rights of the monarch.

**Royal revenue.** Where did the monarch's money come from? The monarch collected customs duties, profits of justice (fines imposed by courts), the rent from Crown lands and some revenue from the Church by right. This was termed 'ordinary revenue'. There were other sources of revenue collected by the Crown such as 'wardship' and 'purveyance' (see pp. 28–9) which caused controversy.

### Parliament

Parliament consisted of two houses – the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

**House of Lords.** The House of Lords consisted of the leading noblemen (peers) (who were members of the aristocracy), the law lords, leading lawyers and some bishops. In the early seventeenth century, the House of Lords (the Upper House) was more important than the House of Commons (the Lower House) and could block any bills (laws) coming to it from the Commons. It tended to support the Crown in disputes with the Commons. The reason why so much of seventeenth-century history seems centred around the House of Commons is that the records of the House of Lords were destroyed in a fire in the 1830s, so historians know far more about the House of Commons.

**House of Commons.** Unlike the House of Lords, where peers sat by right, the House of Commons was elected. Elections were called by the monarch and supervised locally by the sheriffs. There were two kinds of Member of Parliament:

- County MPs (knights of the shire) who were elected by the 'forty shilling freeholders'. In other words, all those who owned land worth forty shillings (two pounds) were entitled to vote in county elections.
- The burgesses were MPs who represented boroughs – towns that had a charter from the monarch that allowed them to have an MP. The charter laid down who, in each town, was entitled to vote.

**Who actually voted?** Some boroughs, such as Westminster, had a charter that allowed every male over twenty-one to



vote, some other boroughs had a charter that allowed those who owned property to vote, and others were 'closed' boroughs where only the mayor and some leading citizens could vote. Probably 10 to 20 per cent of the population voted normally. In county elections the sheriffs did not, or could not, check who really was a forty shilling freeholder, and probably a lot more people voted than were legally entitled to.

**Loyalty of MPs.** Most MPs were gentry, but some were lawyers and merchants, especially those holding borough seats.

There were no 'parties' in the modern sense in Parliament. MPs saw themselves as representing their 'countries' (i.e. counties), not any particular party system. They were independent and could be influenced by speeches in Parliament or by royal attitudes and they were proud of the fact that they were independent. Sometimes MPs who shared the same views would get together to try to push their ideas through the House of Commons but there was no 'party system'. There were MPs who, because they had favours from the king, or were councillors, would normally support royal policies in the Commons. However, neither James nor Charles (unlike Elizabeth I) made sure that there were men of enough influence who had respect from other MPs and could be relied on to do this, putting most councillors in the House of Lords.

### Crown and Parliament – different views on rights and roles

**The king's needs for subsidies.** Both James and Charles disliked calling Parliament. There had to be a new parliament at the beginning of a new reign but after that parliaments were called only because the Crown wanted subsidies for help with financial difficulties.

**Parliament's view of its rights.** Parliament did not always see its role as being only to vote subsidies, and this was the basis for many of the disputes in the early Stuart parliaments. Parliament claimed certain 'privileges' as rights such as:

- the right to 'free speech',
- freedom from arrest while sitting as an MP,
- the right to settle disputed elections, when there was an argument about a borough charter or who had actually won an election.

Henry VIII and Elizabeth I had, on occasions, let Parliament discuss religion (in theory part of the royal prerogative) and other matters. Parliament also saw itself as having the right to punish corrupt and inefficient royal councillors because this had happened in the Middle Ages.

**The Crown's view.** The Crown, of course, took a different view of Parliament's rights. Monarchs saw Parliament as being the means to raise subsidies and on occasions bring 'grievances' to the Crown. Parliament had a large number of lawyers, and gentry with legal training, and it often looked back hundreds of years into the past to prove that it had the right to discuss matters that the Crown disliked being discussed, because Parliament had done so in the distant past.

Parliament did not meet regularly and, even in years when Parliament was sitting, the sessions lasted only a few weeks so Parliament was not like a modern parliament, sitting for most of the year doing regular business. Most of society took very little interest in the issues of Parliament. However, there was an established **political nation**.

### RELIGION IN THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

**The importance of religion.** Nowadays religious belief is seen as a matter for individuals. This was not so in the seventeenth century. It was impossible to separate religion, politics and royal authority. Religion was central to nearly everyone's view of the world, and religious belief formed the cement that held people's lives together. Christianity had split in the sixteenth century into, at first, Catholic and Protestant. This split had caused a series of terrible religious wars in Europe with each side claiming to be absolutely right.

#### KEY THEME

**Subsidies** were a form of taxation based on a valuation of the subject's 'movable goods' – usually amounting to one-tenth or one-fifteenth of the value. Local 'commissioners' (usually JPs) assessed those who could afford to pay, estimating how much their goods were worth.

Only Parliament could vote subsidies, which were the form in which Parliament voted money to the Crown. In theory, Parliament voted subsidies only in cases of emergency, as the king should normally live of his own.

Problems with the valuations on which subsidies were based:

- Rising prices (an important future problem) were not taken into account, so the real worth of subsidies went down.
- The local gentry tended to 'under-assess' their neighbours and friends.

#### KEY THEME

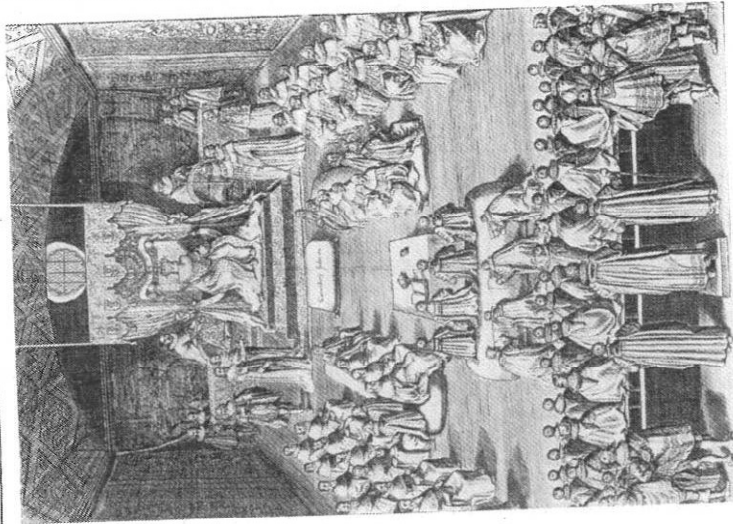
**The political nation** was made up of those who had an interest in politics and what happened in Parliament. This interest was not constant – it appeared at times of elections when there were particular issues that stirred interest.

In a largely illiterate population most people took no part in politics because they did not know about or understand it. However, those in the higher classes, from yeomen upwards, voted and were literate; they comprised what historians call 'the political nation'.

# Why was the Crown quarrelling with Parliament?

By 1603 a number of issues had begun to sour relations between the Crown and Parliament. During the reign of James I (1603–25) these issues developed into a running argument between the King and the House of Commons. In 1625 Charles I succeeded to the throne at a difficult time.

## C Crown vs Parliament



Charles I opening Parliament, 1625

### THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

Both James and Charles believed in the 'Divine Right of Kings'. A king was God's **REGENT** on Earth, answerable only to divine judgement after death. In 1610 James claimed that kings were 'not only God's lieutenants upon Earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods'. Charles believed this even more strongly.

**BUT** Parliament believed the King had to act within the law.

### ROYAL PREROGATIVE

James and Charles believed the King had the power to make decisions that were beyond the competence of Parliament:

- Foreign policy: the King was free to make and break alliances, arrange royal marriages and take England to war.
- The army was the King's army, and took its orders only from him.
- Parliament was called and dissolved at the King's pleasure. The king could 'prorogue' Parliament, interrupting its sitting for as long as he liked.
- The King appointed all judges and ministers. Ministers did not have to be chosen from Parliament, nor were members of the Privy Council answerable to Parliament.
- The King was the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The King appointed the bishops and decided doctrine.

**BUT** Parliament had the privilege of freedom of speech.

### ROYAL FINANCE

Parliament expected the King to pay the costs of his household, court and government from the Crown's private income – his 'ordinary revenue'. The growing costs of government, inflation, and James I's extravagance made this more difficult without extraordinary revenue – subsidies voted by Parliament.

- Therefore, the King called Parliament more frequently to ask for money.
- Parliament expected the King to explain why he needed more money.
- Parliament was learning to withhold subsidies until the King had addressed its grievances.
- Parliament's grievances were encroaching on issues that the King brought were part of his royal prerogative – for example foreign policy, the Church of England.

**BUT** the King believed that he had the right to raise money without Parliament's consent if he judged it necessary.

### PARLIAMENT'S PRIVILEGES

By 1603 Parliament had a strong sense of its own rights.

- The King had no right to enter the chamber of the House of Commons.
- Members of Parliament enjoyed freedom from arrest during the existence of a Parliament, after which they might be called to account for what they had said or done outside the chamber. What passed between them within the House was theoretically sacrosanct, yet still there were grey areas, notably the legal standing of MPs accused of treason.
- Freedom of speech: the Crown accepted that MPs had the right to discuss matters which affected the COMMONWEALTH: things such as taxation, the Poor Law, the state of the highways, crime.

**BUT** the Crown defended its right to formulate policy. In 1621 James I clashed with Parliament over this. When the Commons passed a 'PROTESTATION' criticising him for failing to respect Parliament's privileges, James was so angry that he ripped it from the Commons' journal with his own hands. The problem was that no clear distinction could be made between the King's prerogative and Parliament's legitimate interests.

### IMPEACHMENT

By the early 1620s Parliament was turning itself into a court of law by reviving the medieval process of impeachment. The House of Commons impeached the accused person, who then stood trial before the House of Lords. It was clear that Parliament would use impeachment as a way of bringing the King's ministers to account.

**BUT** the King said his choice of ministers was a matter of royal prerogative.

### ACTIVITY

Study Chart C. Then copy and complete the following table. This should help to focus your attention on the issues that were dividing King and Parliament by 1625.

ISSUES	THE KING'S VIEW	PARLIAMENT'S VIEW
The Divine Right of Kings		
Royal prerogative		
Royal Finance		
Parliament's privileges		
Impeachment		
The Church of England		

### THE COMMONS' PROTESTATION, 1621

*The liberties of Parliament are the ancient and undoubted birthright and inheritance of the subject of England; and affairs concerning the King, State, and defence of the realm and of the Church of England, and the maintenance and making of laws, and redress of grievances are proper subjects and matters of counsel and debate in Parliament.*

### FOCUS ROUTE

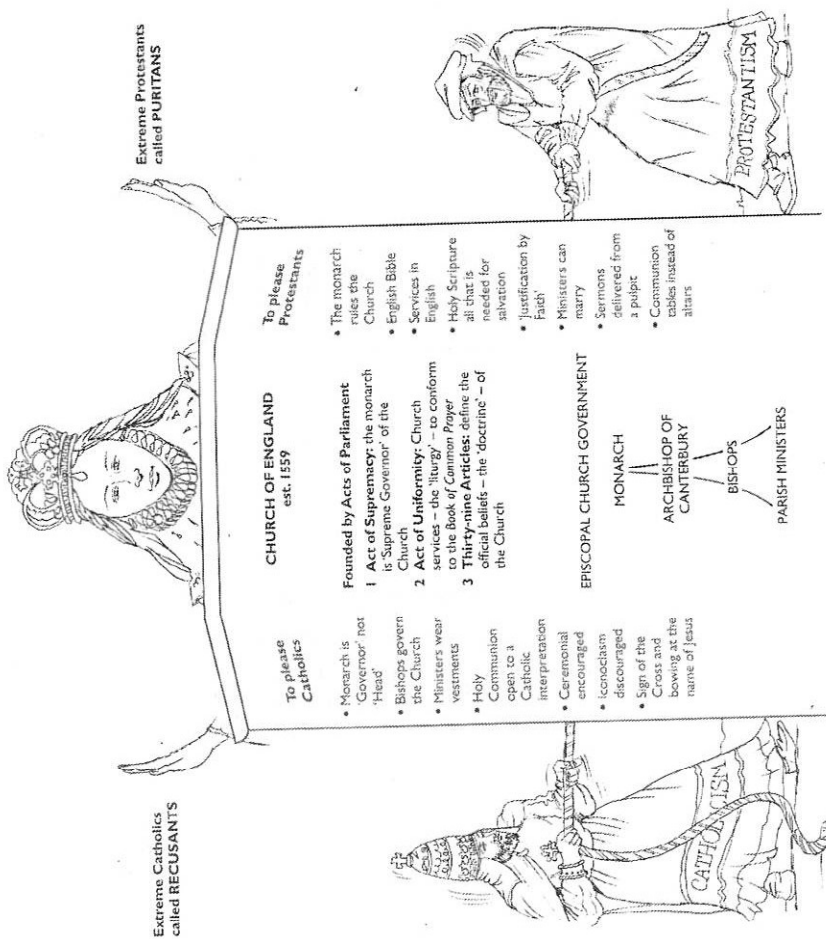
Who's who in the English Civil War? As you work through this book, you will encounter many people who had a major impact on events. At various places in the margin you will find a 'Who's who?' box, drawing your attention to a significant individual. Use the indexes of history books and search on the internet to find out more about these people. You could also try looking them up in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). Make notes on each person to create your own 'Who's who in the English Civil War?' reference list or database.

**ACTIVITY**

Study Chart D, The Elizabethan Settlement.

- 1 Which aspects of the Church of England were taken from Catholicism and which from Protestantism?
- 2 Why was the settlement unlikely to win over the extremists on both sides?

**D The Elizabethan Settlement**



**Why were the English quarrelling about religion?**

Alongside the constitutional quarrels (see Chart C), a problem of special importance was religion. Protestants and Catholics had been fighting each other in Europe for nearly 100 years. The Church of England, dating from the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, tried to create a national church in which all but the most extreme Catholics and Protestants could worship side-by-side (see Chart D). By isolating the extremists, Elizabeth I had hoped to defuse dangerous religious tensions.

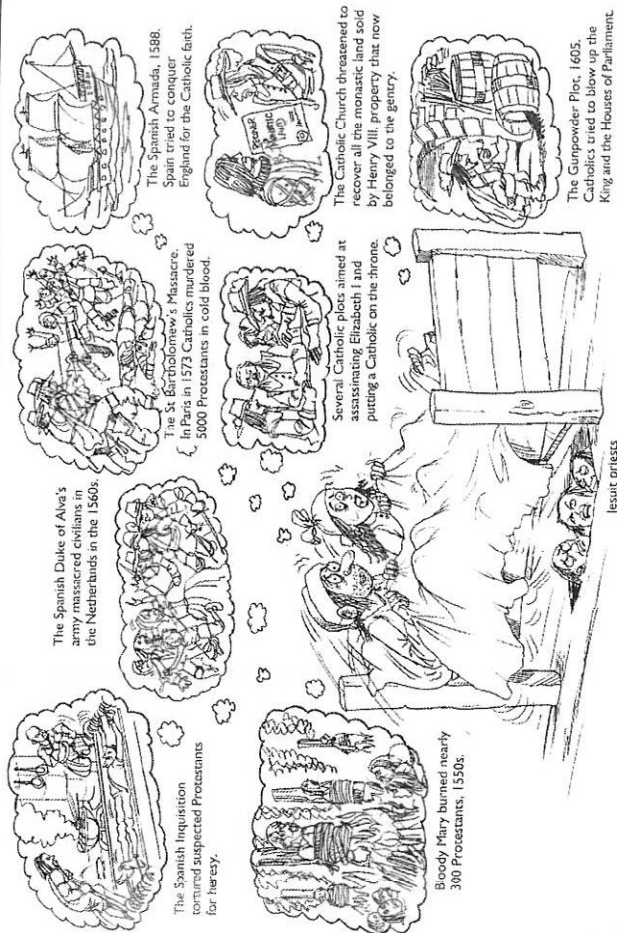
**PEW LAWS**  
 A series of laws aimed at Catholics, who imposed penalties on those who refused to attend Church of England services.

England was now a Protestant country, but some Catholics still hoped to convert England to the Catholic faith. By the time James I ascended the throne in 1603, the Crown was coming under pressure from Puritans to enforce the anti-Catholic PEW LAWS more strictly.

The Crown's view of the religious problem was different from that of the Puritans. Elizabeth and James believed the real threat to stability came from the extremists. The Puritans saw all Catholics as potential traitors whose loyalty was already suspect. They therefore saw no risk in persecution, believing that the Crown's 'softly soiled' approach was misguided and dangerous.

The Catholics themselves were divided. Most were loyal subjects. Their position was compromised by the extremists; incidents such as the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 seemed to confirm the Puritan view of the seriousness of the Catholic threat. At the heart of the Protestant nightmare (see Chart E) lay the belief that the Catholics would stop at nothing to destroy England and the Protestant faith.

**E The Protestant nightmare**



Unless these religious quarrels were handled very skillfully, the Elizabethan Settlement might fail in its aim of defusing religious tensions.

**Was it possible to govern England successfully despite these quarrels?**  
 At the heart of the debate about the origins of the English Civil War lie two questions.

- 1 Was the Civil War inevitable? Was England bound to pass through a period of extraordinary violence before the problems it faced in 1603 could be resolved?
- 2 What was the Civil War about? What does it tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of English government and society at that time?

These issues underpin the main lines of enquiry of this book.

**DISCUSS**

Look back over pages 6–9. Do you think that the problems that existed could have been resolved peacefully?