

# FROM THE HISTORY OF GREAT BRITAIN

The history of the British Isles is very long and dramatic. We have very little information about people inhabiting the British Isles in the pre-historic period, though some structures built by them have been preserved (Stonehenge). The first inhabitants of Britain are called the Iberians and they are believed to have come to the country by land. They were followed by Celtic tribes that came to Britain between 800 and 700 B.C. Two hundred years later they were followed by another Celtic tribe - by ancient Britons after whom the country was called Britain. The most important survival of Celtic Britain is the existence of three living languages: Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic.

In 43 the Romans started occupation of the country and remained in occupation for nearly 400 years. Fifty years after the Romans left the British Isles (in the middle of the 5th century) the country was invaded by Germanic tribes from the Continent - mainly by the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. They conquered the Celts and drove them to the west and to the north of the country. The largest part of the country was occupied by the Angles, after whom the country was called England (in Old English Engla-land, i.e. land of the Angles). From the 8th century the country had to face the Scandinavian invasions which continued till the 11th century. The Anglo-Saxon period can be characterized as a period of transition from a tribal to a feudal organization of society. The process was accelerated by the introduction of Roman Christianity.

## **THE PERIOD OF FEUDALISM (1066 - 15<sup>th</sup> century)**

In this period the modern English nation and language came into being. The year 1066 is the first really important date in England's history. In this year William, Duke of Normandy, invaded England and defeated the Saxon king Harold at the Battle of Hastings. He was proclaimed King of England and became known as William the Conqueror. The Norman Conquest had far-reaching consequences for the development of Britain and the English language because the Normans brought feudalism and the French language to the country.

In the year 1215 Magna Charta Libertatum was signed by King John. It was an important document, which limited the absolute power of the king and soon after the first steps to create the Parliament were taken.

**JOHN LACKLAND** was a weak king, whose reign, from beginning to end, was a period of tyranny, cruelty and disgrace (hanba). John lost most of his possessions in France (that is why he was nicknamed Lackland). As he wanted to win his French territories back, he needed more and more money in order to finance his mostly unsuccessful military campaigns (válečné tažení). This led to levying (vybírání) heavy taxes and, as a result, to a great social unrest. Especially the barons were unsatisfied with the unlimited power of the king. They united and rose in opposition to him. John was made to meet his barons on an appointed day to sign a charter (výsadní listina) binding him to rule more justly with the participation and consent of his barons. This happened on the 15th of June 1215 and the document was called **the Great Charter of Liberties (Magna Charta Libertatum)**. A lot of historians consider it to be the corner stone of British parliamentary democracy.

England owned large possessions in France thanks to John's father, Henry II, who married the former wife of the French king (Louis VII). She brought him large properties as her dowry (věno). In that way Henry became one of the most powerful kings of the then Europe. Henry was a firm ruler, a man of great political ambitions. He wanted to control both the state matters and the matters of the Church, which resulted in a conflict, and consequently in the murder of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170.

At the beginning of the conflict Thomas Becket was one of the true friends of the king, but after being appointed Archbishop, he began to defend the independence of the Church and in that way act against the king's interests. In the end he was murdered, probably on the orders of the king in the cathedral. Later on, Becket was canonized and Canterbury became a popular place of pilgrimage to his tomb until Reformation, which was strongly anti-Roman.

John Lackland had a famous brother, King Richard I (better known as Richard the Lion-Hearted) Richard was a brave man, who spent most of his time in wars (he was also one of the leaders of the Third Crusade (křížová výprava). During his absence in England the country was ruled by his brother John. It was the time when the justice in the country was done by the legendary Robin Hood, who robbed the rich and protected the poor.

Edward I. attempts to conquer Wales and Scotland.

## **THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY**

The main events of the period:

1. The Hundred Years' War in France (1337-1453).
2. The Black Death (or the Great Plague) (1348)
3. The Peasants' Rising (1381)

### **1. HUNDRED YEARS' WAR IN FRANCE**

1. The War started in 1337 under Edward III who wished to win back the lost English possessions in France and started a war, which, contrary to all expectations and with varying success, lasted more than one hundred years and ended by the defeat of the English. Inspired by Joan of Arc, a poor peasant girl, the French drove the English out of France at last.

There were several important battles on the French soil. Two of them should be remembered:

- a) the Battle of Crécy [kre:si] in 1346,
- b) the Battle of Agincourt (1415), won by Henry V.

#### **The Battle of Crécy**

This was the first time that English and Bohemian troops stood against each other as enemies. The French were defeated and the blind King of Bohemia, John of Luxemburg, a true ally of the French, was found dead on the battlefield. His banner (korouhev) bearing the motto "Ich dien " (= I serve) and three eagle feathers became a valuable booty (kořist) to Edward III. He gave them to his son, the well-known Black Prince. The feathers (later replaced by ostrich feathers) became the heraldic sign of the future Princes of Wales.

### **2. THE BLACK DEATH**

The Black Death (1348) added to the unrest of the period. It was a violent epidemic which (in England) reduced the population from four to two million people. It was called Black Death because it caused black spots to appear on the skin of people. The plague made the economic situation of the country very bad which led to social unrest and finally to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

### **3. THE PEASANTS REVOLT (1361)**

was led by a radical Watt Tyler The revolting people were promised reforms but they were cruelly disappointed by the King Richard II. As soon as they laid down their arms, they were cruelly punished. Watt Tyler himself was arrested and executed. King Richard II was the son of the famous Black Prince and at the age of 15 he married Anne, the 14-year old daughter of the

Bohemian King Charles IV. It proved to be a happy marriage. Anne had a positive influence on the king and she often acted in favour of the poor. She became very popular in England and was called "Good Queen Anne" or "Mother of England". She is buried in Westminster Abbey with her husband in a joint tomb. It was the members of the delegation accompanying the young princess on her way to England who - inspired by the ideas of John Wycliffe – brought his ideas back to Bohemia.

## **THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY IN ENGLAND**

The main events of the period:

- a) The end of the wars in France (1453).
- b) The Wars of the Roses (1455-1485).
- c) Henry VII. – the first king of the Tudor dynasty on the throne of England.

After the end of the wars in France England herself was torn with a tragic conflict between two powerful branches of the royal family – the House of York and the House of Lancaster. They waged civil war against each other to secure throne for their contenders. The wars lasted for 30 years and are called the Wars of the Roses because the white rose was the symbol of the Yorkists, the Lancastrians being represented by the red rose. One of the key characters of those days was Richard III with his unbelievable longing for power. Step by step, Richard removed his opponents and former friends from his way in order to become king of England at last.

The country was rescued from Richard's tyranny by Henry, Earl of Richmond, who defeated him in the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. With Henry a new dynasty ascended the English throne the Tudor dynasty.

## **THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY IN ENGLAND**

The 16th century is also known as the Tudor Period. The period may be characterized as a turning point in English history. While in the Middle Ages England was a small unimportant country, in the Tudor period it became one of the leading world powers. The new way of life was also reflected in culture and the Tudor period may be characterized as the age of the Renaissance.

There were several factors that contributed to the rise of England:

1. The great geographical discoveries (America, a sea route to India).
2. The progressive character of the development of industry and trade.
3. The co-operation between the monarchy and the new class - the bourgeoisie.
4. The Reformation.
5. The defeat of the Spanish Armada, which made England a great sea power.

All these important events are connected with the king Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth I. Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and founded the Church of England and proclaimed himself the head of it. In this way he increased his wealth and influence, his political and economic power.

Elizabeth I. was a popular queen. She realized the value of capitalist enterprise and encouraged trading expeditions. She had shares in trading companies, under her rule the merchants grew wealthy and supported the monarchy. England managed to destroy the Spanish - by that time the most powerful country in the world. In 1584 Virginia - the 1st English colony in America was founded by Walter Raleigh.

## 17<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ENGLAND

The first years of the 17th century can be characterized as a period of growing conflict between the King and Parliament, representing the interests of the bourgeoisie. This conflict led to the Civil War in the 1640s. With the new dynasty the Stuarts began to rule in England. The king disregarded the traditional rights of the English Parliament and tried to rule without it. The conflict came to a head under the second Stuart king

Charles I and in the year 1640 the Civil War started. In this war the Royalists (the king's party) fought against the Puritans representing the interests of the bourgeoisie (the Parliament party). They were commanded by Oliver Cromwell.

The war ended with the victory of Cromwell's army and with the execution of the King. The monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished.

England was declared a republic. It was called the Commonwealth (1649 – 58) and was headed by Oliver Cromwell. The new republic however had to face many problems and conflicts and so after 11 years (two years after Cromwell's death it was decided to restore monarchy in the country to prevent the radicalism of the masses. In 1660 Charles II (the exiled son of the executed king) was proclaimed King of England.

**The following period (about 100 years long) (1760s – 1850s)** is the period of struggle between France and Britain for world domination, the period of colonial expansion, especially in North America (Canada 1763) and India. The victory of the British in Canada in 1763 meant the growth of the British colonial empire. The exploitation of the colonies, especially of India brought the growth of the British wealth.

There were several reasons for why industrialization in Britain took place earlier than in other countries: the early decline of feudalism, the growth of strong bourgeoisie, colonial expansion, and important technical improvements. All this resulted in the development of mass production which enabled to transform the economic and social structure of the country. But all this led to the rise of the working class which had to fight for its rights.

In the second half of the 19th century Britain became the strongest world power (the workshop of the world, the greatest financial and commercial power, the greatest sea power and the greatest colonial power). But on the other hand it was also a period of strong exploitation of the working class that often worked under horrible conditions (long working hours – 14, 16 and even 18 hours a day, low wages, horrible housing conditions).

In order to defend their common interests the industrial workers started to organize themselves which in fact was the beginning of the trade union movement – thus Britain became the cradle of the trade union movement. This period was also the period of strong social struggle of the Luddites, who were wrecking the machines in the new factories considering machines to be the cause of their poverty. In 1837–48 it was the Chartist Movement that expressed the interests of the working class, but it was also bound to fail.

**The 20th century** can be characterized as a period of the decline of Britain as a world power.