

GB – Earliest times and the Middle Ages

1: From the Earliest Times to the Second Nordic Invasion

History is governed by geography, and Britain is no exception to this rule. From the early ages the British Isles, especially the flat low-lying south and east coastlines, were a temptation to different wandering tribes because of the mild climate and fertile soils that offer perfect agricultural conditions. Apart from its lavish greenery, the island was also famous for its natural resources – there was gold, tin and iron in the ground, big and small game in the forests; the rivers swarmed with fish and provided excellent navigable inlets into the hinterland.

The 1st settlers came to the island about 3000 or 2500 BC. They were dark-haired Iberians from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain) or maybe even the North African coast. **The Iberians** were hunters, and later they became primitive farmers. They were the men of the Bronze Age who raised Stonehenge – a center of religious worship, which was probably built over a period of a thousand years. It was also a capital whose authority extended all over the British Isles, where similar but smaller ‘hengés’ were constructed. Historians know very little about those remote times, and what they know is only through archeological revelations.

From around 700 BC to 500 BC or 300 BC another group of people began to arrive on the island. These were **the Celts** who had come from the territory of today’s North-western Germany and the Netherlands. The Celts were men of Iron who could make better weapons and who were more technically advanced than the Iberians. They came in waves, kindred but mutually hostile, and each with a dialect of its own. Erse, Gaelic and Welsh, the languages that they and the Iberians evolved, are still spoken in Great Britain.

The Celts imposed themselves as aristocracy on the conquered Iberian tribes in Britain and in Ireland. Eventually the races mixed but not in the same proportions throughout the island.

The physical formation of the island is in fact the key to understanding the racial make-up of its population and the history of its early settlement. The mountain ranges of Wales, North-west England and Scotland provided a natural obstacle for the early invaders preventing them from overrunning the whole island in just one go. This is why the inhabitants of the so-called **Celtic Britain** (Cornwall, Wales, The Scottish Highlands) are the descendants of the oldest people. They are often called '**the Celtic Fringe**', but, as a matter of fact, most of them are of pre-Celtic origin – their forefathers were not the fair-haired or red-haired Celts but the dark-haired Iberians.

The Celts, like the Iberians, were tribesmen or clansmen. The basis of their society were family ties. The Celtic people did not develop any territorial organization. The bonds of the tribesmen were not with the land but with other clan members. The clans were perpetually at war with one another.

Thanks to their use of iron technology, the Celts were better farmers than the Iberians. They grew wheat and oats, and they knew how to make mead (grain fermented with honey). They bred pigs for food, sheep for clothing and oxen to pull the plough. They also bred horses, which were the chief means of barter and sources of wealth. The Celts traded not only with one another but also with other tribes on the island and in Europe. Hunting, fishing, herding, beekeeping, weaving, carpentry and metal work were the chief occupations of the Celtic population.

Trade with the continent was important for political and social reasons. The Celts in the South of the island were in close intercourse with their kin in Europe. From them they learnt to use coins instead of iron bars for money.¹ When the Britons² (the Celts on the island) found out that Julius Caesar was marching to subdue their relatives on the continent, they sent over ships and warriors to help their relatives in defense, which was one of the reasons why Caesar decided to invade the island as well. The other reason was the island's reputation as an important provider of food, and since **the Romans** needed supplies for their own army fighting the Gauls (the tribes occupying the territory of today's France), the conquest of the island was inevitable.

Therefore the Romans did not come with a view to settling; they came to exploit and to govern by right of the superior civilization. In order to achieve their goals, they put a lot of effort to induce their Celtic subjects to assimilate the Latin language and lifestyle. Every possible encouragement was offered to the Celtic chief to make him Roman at heart and to Latinize him, and on that condition he could remain chief of his tribe. This policy had already been very successful in Spain and France where the Romans were long enough to effectively change the languages and the customs of the people. In Britain this method would have been equally effective had the Romans stayed longer. The 1st Roman expedition came in 55 BC, but it was not until one century later that permanent occupation began (AD 43). In AD 409 Rome pulled its last troops out of Britain, and what was

¹ Already 150 years BC British tribes in the South of the island had their own gold coinage.

² The name Britain comes from Greco-Roman word 'Pretani' designating inhabitants of Britain. The Romans mispronounced the word and called the island 'Britannia'.

left behind them were three things of enduring value: Welsh Christianity, good roads and a few cities.

Initially the Romans intended to conquer the whole island. This seemed to be pretty easy because of their superior, highly disciplined army and because the Celtic tribes were continually at one another's throats. The Romans established a permanent occupation across the Southern half of Britain where they developed the Romano-Celtic culture. From there they retained control over the upland areas, which were never developed. The Roman method of conquest was to build military roads, strategically planned for the whole region. Along them the Romans planned forts garrisoned with regular troops. With the use of forts and roads they could keep oversight in some trouble areas like Wales. Unlike other conquerors of the island, they did not usher in a host of immigrant farmers to replace the native population; they also rarely resorted to indiscriminate slaughter and wholesale destruction.

Their chief difficulty was the problem with the northern frontier. The Romans attempted to conquer Scotland (which they called 'Caledonia') for over a century but they failed. The Caledonians, the Pictish, and other partly Celtic tribes residing in the inaccessible mountains put up a stiff resistance. There were also frequent rebellions of the Brigantes in the Roman rear, which made the conquest even more difficult. The final limit to the northern frontier was marked by the wall designed by Emperor **Hadrian** and erected between 122 and 127 AD. No attempt was made to annex Ireland to the Roman territory, and thus the area of Roman occupation corresponds roughly to the territory of modern England and Wales.

In the occupied territories the Roman civilization flourished – the villas were plentiful, the cities were becoming larger, the commerce developed (London was the greatest center of trade). North of Hadrian's Wall, in Dover and Cornwall, tribalism survived in its more primitive form. Again the topography of the island determined the course of history. Owing to the geographical and cultural distinction between the occupied lowlands and unoccupied highlands, when the Roman Empire began to collapse and Roman soldiers started to withdraw, the regions destined to be destroyed by Germanic invaders were the Latin districts, while elsewhere Celtic culture was destined to survive.

The fall of the Roman Empire began in the 2nd half of the 4th century. In Britain it was precipitated by the Celtic revival – Celtic raids on Roman territories, both from Ireland and from Scotland, became more frequent and bolder. In the 1st half of the 5th century the defunct Roman Empire was no longer capable of providing security for most of its citizens, especially in such remote outposts of civilization as Britain. The situation was significantly exacerbated by the renewed Anglo-Saxon raids, which between 350 and 400 were particularly severe.

The pagan people who invaded the island after the Roman troops had left were the Nordic people: **Anglo-Saxon, German and Scandinavian**. They spoke allied languages, had the same religion, the same epic poetry celebrating their gods and heroes (such as Beowulf). They also had common art, different from Greco Roman or Celtic, and they observed the same customs in war and agriculture. Most of them were farmers searching for better lands to plough, but there were also fishermen, seal hunters, whalers, and pirates among them. Their form of government was superior to the Celts – they were not organized in tribes but in almost feudal societies. The kinship, the natural bond among the members of a clan who supported one another, gave way in the Anglo-Saxon commu-

nities to the personal relation of a warrior to his chief, whose personal virtues as well as his noble descent made him the leader. Contrary to the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons had both kingship and aristocracy – their form of government was **autocratic kingship**, which is a transitional stage between tribalism and fully-fledged feudalism. The military organization of the Anglo-Saxons was also based not on kinship but on personal attachment and loyalty of all the warriors to the chief who organized the expedition. The bones of these nameless chiefs are still dug up in the so-called early Anglo-Saxon graveyards.

There are no chronicles of Anglo-Saxon conquest because, unlike the Romanized Celts, they were illiterate. We owe our knowledge of that period to an English monk **Bede** who 300 years later described those remote events in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The Saxons, Angles and the Jutes certainly wreaked havoc in the orderly Romano-Celtic world. The Latinized Britons were slaughtered or pushed away to the mountainous areas where the primitive Celtic or pre-Celtic tribes had so far resided. The Anglo-Saxons penetrated into the interior of the country through the rivers and the Roman roads, which only hastened the pace of conquest and destruction. **King Arthur**³ is a half mythical figure that is believed to have led the Celts into battle with the heathen Anglo-Saxons, but in spite of his bravery and impregnable forts and stonewalled cities, the Celts were doomed to be defeated. The reason for that was that the Britons were civilized citizens, not warriors, and once they could no longer depend on the army for protection they were practically helpless when confronted by the fierce Anglo-Saxon warriors.

The early Anglo-Saxons differed from the Britons in many respects. For example, they were not city dwellers like the Britons. They lived in large rural townships in log houses, and they tilled the soil in one common field. They could have taken the Roman villas or they could have settled in the Roman towns as soon as they buried the bodies of their previous inhabitants. Instead they left Roman buildings and towns empty and went on with their way of life. Chester, Bath and Canterbury were re-peopled in the course of time. London,⁴ due to its location at the junction of Roman roads, also managed to survive, thus the good work of Rome was not completely wiped out by the Anglo-Saxon savages.

In the course of the 6th century the Anglo-Saxons established a number of kingdoms in the South and East of England whose names still exist in modern names of certain shires (Essex, Sussex, Wessex). These kingdoms were not allies – they were always on the warpath. By the middle of the 7th century three large and powerful kingdoms emerged: Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex.

The Anglo Saxons were wild people whose destructiveness completely obliterated the Christian religion and the Romano-Celtic language. The Britons, forced to seek refuge among the ‘uncultured’ Celtic tribes in Wales, Cornwall or the Western part of the Northern uplands, in a span of a few generations, forgot why they had despised the illiterate

³ King Arthur is the hero of a popular legend about how he proved his title to the kingship by withdrawing the Sword **Excalibur** from the rock in which it had been fixed by **Merlin**, the magician who later became his counselor. Arthur’s court was called **Camelot** and was famous for its **Round Table**. Other legends connected with Arthur tell about his wife’s **Guinevere**’s unfaithfulness (with **Lancelot**) and about the quests to find the **Holy Grail**.

⁴ London dates back to Roman times even though its name is of Celtic origin. After the Roman conquest it started to play a crucial role as a port and center of commerce. Roman walls enclosed the area corresponding roughly to the city walls in medieval times.

Anglo-Saxon brutes. Yet because the Anglo-Saxons took possession of the richest farming lands in the South and East of England, in the course of time they evolved a civilization which was in many respects superior to the Welsh mountaineers or inhabitants of barren Cornish moors.

The Anglo-Saxon conquest repeated the scheme known from the previous invasions of the island – the race of warriors from the continent settled in the rich lowland area of southern and eastern England decimating its former inhabitants and pushing the survivors into the Cornish peninsula or into the Western or Northern mountains. The Anglo-Saxon conquest proceeded according to the same pattern once again proving that geography can reverse the course of history. The geographical features of the island made the Celts barbarous and the Anglo-Saxon civilized.

The Celts hated the Anglo-Saxons so much that they did not try to convert the conquerors into **Christianity**. The conversion of the island was the accomplishment of foreign missionaries of whom **St. Augustine of Rome**, sent in 597 by Pope Gregory the Great, was the most famous. St. Augustine established his quarters in **Canterbury** in Kent, and in 601 he became **the 1st Archbishop of Canterbury**. From there with the aid of his monks, he successfully converted one by one the ruling families of the English Kingdoms.

The Christian Conquest of the island was, as G.M. Trevelyan puts it, ‘the return of the Mediterranean Civilization in a new form.’ The Church hierarchy was modeled on the Roman Empire and therefore its forms and policies were particularly suitable for state building. In other words, the political and legal system of the church could be easily transplanted into the secular sphere in order to create the whole machinery of state. The return of the Mediterranean Civilization in Christian guise also meant the return of literacy and learning to the island. The lore that the missionaries and monks brought from Rome also had its roots in Latin Civilization.

Christianity was very popular among the Anglo-Saxon people. Conversions to the new faith were frequent and spontaneous. The main reason was that Christian missionaries gave the Anglo-Saxons a religion that was more sustaining than their own pagan faith. The worship of pagan gods among the Anglo-Saxons before the advent of Christianity had been a warrior’s religion whose mythology reflected the most cherished national traits: courage, generosity, honesty, and loyalty to the king and to friends. These are virtues that British schools still try to inculcate in their wards. The Nordic religion had taught people not to be afraid of death, to be bold and heroic by giving them the example of their gods who were also perishable to the forces of chaos. Christianity helped the Anglo-Saxon to make sense of that chaos by giving them a clear cosmology and definite doctrines. So even though Christianity spoke of matters alien to the Nordic mind: charity, humility and submission of the layman to the priest, its allure was irresistible. By AD 660 only Sussex and the Isle of Wight had not accepted the new faith. In the next twenty years English missionaries were instrumental in bringing Christianity to the land of their forebears – Germany.

St. Augustine was primarily interested in establishing the authority of the Church among the ruling families and nobles. He devoted his energies to converting Anglo-Saxon kings and queens. The pattern of conversion was similar in every kingdom: first the king’s wife adopted the new faith, and then became an agent to convince her husband whose court followed the king’s suit. The ordinary people remained pagan for generations to come.

The Celtic Church did more than the Roman Church to win the hearts of humble people. The Celtic Church had been established by **St. Patrick** who was probably a Romanised Briton who lived in Wales. At the onset of the 5th Century, he must have been captured by the Scots⁵ whereby he converted Ireland to Christianity. Afterwards, the Irish monks went to Scotland and Northern England to continue St. Patrick's work. This Church, as a result of the downfall of the Roman Empire and the conquest of France and Italy by barbarous tribes, was cut off from Roman Civilization and developed its own distinctive Celtic spirit based on Celtic tribalism. Contrary to the Roman church, it did not have any hierarchy or organization, and therefore it was 'democratic:' each tribe had its own monastery, which did not recognize any authority. The monks were hermits, scholars, artists, warriors and missionaries. In the times when it seemed that the dark ages in Europe had set in for good, they cherished the knowledge of classical secular literature that had practically vanished in Western Europe, thus saving it for posterity.

The Celtic missionaries started to convert the Anglo-Saxons from the North, going from village to village to bring Christ's teaching to the common folk. Until the middle of the 7th century, the monks of the Celtic church did as much as those from Canterbury to convert the Anglo-Saxon race. They reconverted Northumbria (which used to be under the jurisdiction of the Roman Church); they evangelized Essex and Mercia.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the two churches remained in a state of dispute. The main cause for the mutual antagonism was the rivalry in the territory of Anglo-Saxon England as well as differences in organization. The dissent between the two churches reached a crescendo when the two churches clashed about the date of Easter. In 663 the King of Northumbria chose the Roman Church, and his rejection of the Celtic Church caused the retreat of the Celtic missionaries from England. In the following decades Scotland, Wales and Ireland came under the control of the Church of Rome, proving that a good organization could prevail over periodic lapses of faith.

The decision to choose the Roman Church proved to be very judicious. It may have been partially prompted by the Anglo-Saxon admiration for the superior organization of Frankish kingdoms where the Roman municipal system had not been eradicated by savage invaders. The hierarchy of the Roman Church was an imitation of Roman bureaucracy and municipal life that the Anglo-Saxons had so recklessly obliterated in their earlier days; however, they presently started to regret their destructiveness as a kind of a cultural throwback.

The early adhesion of all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to the Roman Church gave an impetuous towards unity. The Church supported the royal power and taught the kings lessons in administration, legislation and taxation. The centralization and unity of the Church became a model for the structuring of infant states and paved the way towards political unity under one single king. The administration of the Church became a prototype of the administration of the state. Additionally, churchmen, the most educated people of the times, became the chief advisers of the Crown and its secretariat. In this way, Roman ideas, perpetuated by the Roman Church, were passed across different historical periods; from the secular to the religious realm and back to the secular again. The alliance with the Papacy provided the island with the best that the Mediterranean Civilization still had

⁵ The Scots were the Celtic tribes from Ireland – they were the last newcomers to Scotland and they gave their name to the whole land.

to offer. Numerous churches were built on the ruins of Roman villas. Although most of them were eventually pulled down it should be remembered that stone churches were built in England at the time when laity still lived in houses made of wood.

In 669 the Pope sent to Britain **Theodore of Tarsus** who made Canterbury an important center of Latin and Greek culture. He strengthened Roman supremacy over the island, and, after his death, the parish system mushroomed everywhere. The parish, the church and the graveyard become the centre of every village.

The Church was on the one hand modern and spiritual, but, on the other, it was aristocratic and feudal. To build **the Medieval Church** with its magnificent architecture, art and scholarship, the peasants had to pay ecclesiastical dues that quickly reduced them to serfage. The Church held the rulers and average people in awe – the clergymen were formidable people – the only ones who could read or write or make sense of administrative, ecclesiastical and secular laws. Anglo-Saxon kings and lords willingly gave their lands to the Church; some of the kings abandoned their thrones to finish their lives as pilgrims or monks. In return for the land and the dues enforced by the king and his sheriffs, the Church taught nobles jurisdiction that enriched the nobles and the Church itself. In this way the Church promoted feudalism based on an increasingly unequal division of wealth and liberty. The richer and more influential the Church was becoming, the more impoverished and subjugated the peasantry was.

In Anglo-Saxon times the line separating the Church and the State was very thin and blurred. The Bishops were kings' civil servants, priests sat next to Sheriffs in the benches of Shire courts, where both secular and spiritual cases of malpractice came for verdict. The men of the Church were the first people to write down the laws of Anglo-Saxon kings from the oral tradition. They also helped the kings to make new laws on a large number of important matters. In this way they helped to consolidate royal authority and to centralize the power in each state.

The Anglo-Saxon, even though respectful of the clergy and dedicated to the new religion, remained pagan in pure human emotions. Such poems as *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *Deor's Lament* bear witness to the popularity of older pagan ethos. Even though all early Anglo-Saxon poetry came through Christian censorship, there is an overwhelming abundance of pagan ideals and values in it. *Beowulf*, for example, praises the faithfulness of the warrior to his lord and his readiness to die in battle. The typical heroes of such poems are roving spirits and reckless buccaneers unrestrained by any religious dogmas.

Important dates:

2500 BC – 1300 BC	The Iberians
700 BC – 300 BC	The Celts
55 BC	The 1 st Roman expedition of Julius Caesar
AD 122–126	Hadrian's Wall
AD 407–410	Roman withdrawal
AD 350–1066	The Anglo-Saxon Period
AD 601–800	The return of Christianity
AD 800–975	The 2 nd Nordic Invasion

2: The Second Nordic Invasion and the Norman Conquest

Near the end of the 8th century the heathen **Danes and Norsemen (the Vikings⁶)** were restless again and started to launch attacks on Britain, tempted by the island's wealth. The Vikings were pirates as well as farmers. At first they only raided the coasts of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but gradually they started to realize that the Anglo-Saxon kings did not have any fleet to protect their realms, and that the whole island was easy prey. War and plunder on the island became the chief business of the Viking nation. The first successful warriors came home with such transfixing news of the island's riches that the Vikings soon started to perfect plans for permanent occupation.

The Saxons considered the Vikings brutes, and the truth was they were barbarians in comparison with the Danes and Norsemen. In the 9th century the Vikings visited various parts of the world (Venice, Constantinople, Spain, Normandy or even North America). Their voyages gave them knowledge of the world and made them skillful tradesmen. When the 9th century was drawing to a close and it was absolutely clear that the Anglo-Saxons could not keep them out, the Vikings started to take over the best farming lands in England.

The largest host of Viking immigrants came in the days of **Alfred of Wessex**. This group was just a small fraction of a large population movement which changed the political map of the whole of Europe. One of the Viking bands established Normandy in Northern France; other bands settled across the Channel in England. By 875 only King Alfred of Wessex held out against the invaders for one sole reason – Wessex was furthest removed from the Vikings' landing areas.

The Vikings warriors were pioneers in a new type of warfare. They used body-armor, which made them immune to the spears of Saxon peasants. They could move in their boats on rivers and sea, launching surprise attacks in distant parts in the country. Furthermore after their conquest of Normandy they learnt from the French how to mount horses, and on horseback they were as fast and formidable as in their boats.

The twelve years in which the Viking invasion continued gave Alfred the Great (of Wessex) the time to learn to beat the Viking at their game. He reformed his army, organized a mounted infantry made of his vassals, and built permanent garrisons and a fleet. Step by step, he recovered the territories conquered by the invaders where the Vikings, once they settled, started numerous feuds among one another. After he re-captured London, he was strong enough to force the Vikings to accept a treaty.

Alfred the Great was a truly great leader. He brought to Wessex learned men and gave refuge to many scholars. He founded the first school for laymen – the sons of noblemen, his future civil servants, thus breaking the Church's monopoly for learning. After his

⁶ Viking means 'warrior'.

death, the Crown of Wessex went into the hands of his equally gifted and enlightened successors, who merged the Viking population with the indigenous Anglo-Saxon people. A hundred years after the invasion the memory of the atrocities and interracial wrongs grew very dim and common ethnic roots and customs prevailed. When the Vikings received baptism almost all differences between them and the Anglo-Saxons were removed. At first the Viking authority was recognized in the east and north of England (between the Thames and the Tees) but gradually the Vikings accepted the rule of the house of Wessex, provided that they could live under their own traditional Danish laws and their earls. Therefore the territories, which they inhabited, were often referred to as ‘**Danelaw**’. The term was used in the 11th century to indicate an area in which customary law was influenced by Danish practice.

In fact, the coming of the Danes gave a powerful stimulus to the development of **English Common Law**.⁷ The very word ‘law’ is of Danish origin. The Vikings were very appreciative of law and had men especially trained in legal arguments and procedures. The Anglo Saxons took over from the Danes their zeal for legal disputes.

During the war with the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons built walled settlements called **burghs**. In the post-war years these military garrisons and trading centers became also sites of legal proceedings. Soon burghs or **boroughs**, as they are called today, situated in restored Roman cities or in new strategic points (Lincoln, Derby, Northampton, Cambridge among others) became the basic units of municipal (town) administration. In this way England was covered with a network of garrisons and organs of administration similar to contemporary ones.

Contrary to the Anglo Saxons who were pioneer farmers making clearings in the forest to plough the land, the Vikings were city-dwellers and indefatigable traders who made boroughs bustling centers of commerce. Apart from that both Danish and Anglo Saxon farmers continued the strenuous work of deforestation and colonization of new areas. The people of those remote times were still very primitive agriculturists for whom hunting was the main source of food. The state, in the modern sense of the word, did not exist, and work was carried under the leadership of a feudal lord, who provided military protection, economic help and justice. But the lord’s assistance had a very extortionate price – in return for the lord’s protection the peasant had to labor for the lord. Therefore **feudalism**⁸ which was the outcome of differentiating the functions of warrior and husbandman (farmer) entailed putting limits to individual freedom. On the other hand, the protection of the community and the advancement of agriculture would not have been possible without stratifying medieval society. After the end of tribalism and before the beginning of the state, it was the feudal lord who organized the life of each community.

⁷ In the course of time Common Law came to designate the law administered by the king’s judges, which was the same regardless of the region. Before Henry II evolved the Common Law in the 12th century, the law differed from one region to another. From the 12th century onwards the king’s judges always used the same law. They were specially trained in the Common Law that was based on Anglo-Saxon and later Norman customs, cases and decisions. It was different from the Civil Law of the Roman Empire or the Common Law of the Church.

⁸ The word feudalism comes from the French word *feu* (land held by a lord in return for his service to the sovereign); the tenure of the land that belonged to the king but was used by his vassals was the cornerstone of feudalism. The vassals and the lord were mutually bound – the king had to give his vassals land without which the vassal would not fight for the king. Vassals in turn gave a portion of this land to the knights who were their vassals and owed them military service.

The next step on the way towards fully developed feudalism was the decision taken by king **Ethelred the Unready**.⁹ Ethelred, being unable to control the Vikings in the Danelaw, who, near the end of the 10th century renewed their attacks, started direct taxation of freeholders (independent farmers) to collect ransom for the Danes. His move hastened the decline of husbandmen into serfs. Under **Canute**, the next ruler of England, the taxation was upheld, but its purpose changed. Canute, who was an outstanding leader (he was also the king of Denmark and Norway), used taxes to defend his Empire. From those days onwards taxation was always an important source of royal revenue. In the course of time the task of collecting taxes was assigned to the local lords who, for the Crown, gradually became identified as owners of both the land and the people who lived on that land.

Canute died in 1035 and his son five years later. Therefore, **the Witan** (a Council of wise men – bishops, magnates and lords) chose Edward (one of Ethelred's sons) to be the next king. It is interesting that in Anglo-Saxon times England was an **elective monarchy**. The Witan had the power to elect a new king upon the death of the previous one. The new king did not have to be a descendant of the ruling family and he did not need to have any royal blood in him. **The divine right of succession** (only the descendant of the ruling monarch could become the next sovereign and no earthly authority could change that) was not deeply rooted in English tradition and dates back to the 17th century and the reign of James I Stuart. What is more the Witan should not be considered the germ of the British Parliament, which grew out of the marriage of Anglo-Saxon and Norman institutions¹⁰. The basic difference between the Witan and Parliament was that once the king was appointed, the Witan had no power to control him.

Canute, who had imposed himself by force on the English, was also finally elected by the Witan who preferred a foreign ruler to anarchy. Canute turned out to be a Godsend after all. He was a very popular monarch who won the respect and loyalty of his English subjects by putting them on equal terms with his own Danish countrymen. He not only converted himself to Christianity but also did a lot to eradicate heathenism in the Danelaw, Denmark and Norway. He strengthened the alliance with the Church and was a lavish benefactor of abbeys. Unfortunately he died very early and the empire he had created fell apart. This was a watershed in the history of England because it restored Anglo-Saxon monarch. **Edward the Confessor** was not interested in building a Nordic state depending on sea power that became a key factor in shaping the course of English history. Instead England was drawn into the French orbit of influence and broke its bonds with Scandinavia.

Edward the Confessor, while in exile, had been raised among Norman monks. His mother was Norman and he spoke French and was at heart a Norman monk with little interest in the country he was invited to rule. **Normandy**, the country where he had spent his boyhood and a large part of his adult life, was situated in the North of France and was England's closest neighbor on the continent. Normandy was neither French nor Scandinavian. It had been founded by the Vikings, but the ruling class, though Scandinavian in origin, had been Latinized by the adoption of the French language and customs. The combination of the Viking vitality and ferocity with the French drive towards political unity and effective administration gave rise to the mightiest state in Europe. Normandy

⁹ Ethelred was king of England (978–1016) – his name the Unready came from the old English word meaning that he had received bad advice from the wrong people.

¹⁰ The Norman Conquest and its aftermath will be described later in this chapter.

was a redoubtable stronghold from which the practices of French feudalism surged to conquer Europe.

The Norman feudal Barons were landowners and soldiers who were champions in modern warfare (fighting from the saddle with a sword or a spear). Their cavalry was heavily armed and their castles were invincible bastions. These were the fruits of the final phase of feudalism, and they were not known on the other side of the channel before the conquest.

The Norman society consisted of several ranks. The Duke was the highest in the Norman hierarchy, and he had at his service Barons who received their lands directly from him. Then there were knights who owed military service to the Barons by the same military tenure. The Barons had a remarkably effective administration with their own officers who collected taxes, held courts and commanded troops. The Duke kept Barons in line by issuing licenses to build castles. He also was the only prince to mint money. Norman finance was the best in Europe. The Duke's revenue was collected in hard money, which was something that no other ruler in Europe could boast about. The Norman Church wholeheartedly supported the Ducal Power, in the sphere of administration and legislation, not to mention the fact that some of the Churchmen were at the same time Barons fighting for the Duke. Others were monks living a peaceful and busy life in monasteries – the centers of scholarship.

Edward the Confessor paved the way for **the Norman Conquest** of the island by introducing Normans in high church positions and by leaving after his death a disputed succession (he was very dedicated to the ideal of monkish chastity and did not leave any heirs). The Witan chose **Harold Godwinson** a son of a powerful magnate from Wessex to be the next king and their choice was endorsed by the dying Edward the Confessor. This fact, however, did not put an end to disputes over Harold's weak title to the throne. Harold did not come from any royal family and even though his election to the throne was legitimate, it was challenged by both the Normans in the South and the Danish Vikings in the North.

There were two almost simultaneous invasions of the island, which, from the vantage point of history can be seen as a tragic climax of a long rivalry for the spheres of influence between Scandinavia and Europe. Harold succumbed under this double attack and gradually **William of Normandy** rose as the sole winner. William defeated Harold in the famous **battle of Hastings in 1066** and on Christmas Day was crowned as the next king of England.

The battle gave the English a profound shock because of the military superiority and ruthlessness displayed by the Normans. The brilliance of their strategy and their awesome cavalry threw England on her knees. After the battle the nobles and churchmen alike hurried to make their own separate peace with the Conqueror, hoping that what they were in for was not much worse than what had happened fifty years earlier under the foreign rule of Canute and his Danes. But they were in the dark as to the real intentions of the Conqueror who soon deceived them. William did not plan to keep the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, and his style of wielding power had nothing to do with the light yoke of the Danish king. On the grounds that everybody who had supported Harold forfeited their possession, he started the confiscation of English estates. He used every possible pretext or excuse to rob the English of their lands and to degrade them. These lands were distributed among the Norman Barons as a reward for their services. The confiscation

proceeded in tandem with the conquest (it lasted 5 years), which accounts for one peculiarity of the feudal system that evolved on the island. The Barons owed estates in many different parts of the country, and that fact had several important ramifications. First of all, no Baron possessed more land within a shire than the king. Secondly since the Barons' possessions were scattered far and wide, the Barons were always busy on their way from one estate to another, which made it impossible for them to consolidate their power, to amass an army and to threaten the king.

Although the Normans were the most advanced people of their times on the battlefield, they were as cruel as the wildest savages. Some of the villages whose inhabitants were massacred during the conquest remained deserted for forty years to come. William's army was relatively small and therefore it ravaged the regions it had no power to hold. The survivors were forced to raise for the victors impregnable citadels from which armed horsemen issued forth to exploit or to slaughter. This large-scale extermination of the Anglo-Saxon population, especially the gentry, settled the question whether a few thousand armed-to-the-teeth knights could conquer whole England and coerce her native population to a new way of life.

William established in England the **Norman system of land tenure**. He divided bigger districts into smaller shires and kept the Anglo-Saxon system of sheriffs to counterbalance the power of his Barons. In other words, each shire had its own sheriff, a man of baronial rank to whom William entrusted collecting his taxes and administering his laws. The King did his utmost to tighten his grip of the island, to centralize and secure his power, thus saving England from falling into the chasm of feudal anarchy, prevalent on the continent, where powerful magnates continually conducted a hit-and-run warfare against their rulers and other nobles in order to multiply their riches and enhance their influence.

In order to ensure his security, William built numerous castles which were garrisons used to subdue the mutinies of his Barons and the uprisings of the Anglo-Saxons. But the church proved to be a far better instrument in upholding the royal authority. People were used to obeying priests, priests to obeying bishops, who in turn obeyed the Archbishop of Canterbury, the King's right hand. The Archbishop was in practice the head of the king's government, whereas his tenants-in-chief, the Barons who made his court, were his council. The king consulted them individually or collectively on the issue of the moment, whatever that issue might be.

One of William's greatest reforms was **the division of spiritual and secular courts**. From then onwards, the Bishops had their own courts, which dealt with clergy's felonies, wills, marriages and cases of heresy, whereas secular affairs were tackled in royal courts in which English Common Law was observed. This reform set limits to the authority of the church, a friendly but rival power.

Without the king's control over the Church hierarchy, the king could reign but he would not be able to rule. William the Conqueror commanded the country with the help of **Archbishop Lanfranc**. The King was generous to the church but ever mindful of its power. All his secretaries, judges and most of his civil servants were churchmen rendering services to the Crown. But the cooperation between the Crown and the Church was not always carried out without friction. **William Rufus** (Rufus means red – the king had red hair and face) was not very pious, and **Henry**, his younger brother who took the crown after William's tragic death during a hunting expedition, was the first monarch to get involved in an overt struggle with the Church. The reason of his dispute was the question

of who should elect the Bishops. After several years of disagreement it was decided that bishops would be chosen by the Church, but instead of paying homage to the Pope they would recognize the authority of the king, on the grounds that they were first of all the king's vassals who had their lands from the king. This compromise prevented the Church, which was powerful, wealthy and well organized, from wielding complete control over the society.

Henry I was a powerful ruler not only of England but also of Normandy. After his death, his daughter Matilda was married to a French aristocrat **Geoffrey Plantagenet** who ruled another considerable province of France. Their son **Henry II** took the throne of England in 1154, after 19 years of anarchy, and united under his rule England and western France. He was so powerful that the English Barons accepted him without demur.

For Henry II England was another province of the same cultural realm. The Barons still spoke French and cultivated French culture and customs. However, after Henry II became king of England some of these customs were radically changed. The Barons were no longer allowed to wage private wars against one another (war was the Barons' favorite pastime) and they had to pull down unlicensed castles. Gradually the Barons moved into unfortified manor houses where they had to take up more peaceful hobbies such as hunting, agriculture, politics or art. With each decade they were turning more and more into regular country gentlemen.

Henry II is also credited with laying the foundations for **the jury system**¹¹ by making the famous bench of royal judges. After almost two decades of misrule that made every cog in the Norman machinery of state rusted with disuse, he sent these royal judges to every nook of the country to enforce English Common Law. He also stopped some barbarous procedures as trial by 'ordeal'¹² or trial by battle.¹³ He put the royal shield over all, even the most humble subjects, protecting them from the abuse of the church or the lord alike.

Henry II was an autocrat but he was just, therefore his subjects did not mind that they were subjected to the will of one man. His reign was associated with the restoration of law and order, which were preferable to general state of chaos which had preceded it.

Richard I, Henry II's son, won the nickname **Coeur de Lion (Lionheart)**. He was a very popular king, maybe because for most his life he was away, taking part in **the Crusades**.¹⁴ The Crusades were not an affair of the state but of the knight errand who could in this way prove his piety and satisfy his greed. Richard was the most famous English knight errand, but he found very few followers in 'backwater' England. But indirectly the influence of the Crusades on England (and Europe in general) was great. The Crusades not only made England richer in luxurious goods but also familiar with scientific and philosophical ideas, some of which surpassed the art and learning of Europe.

¹¹ The idea of a Jury goes back to the Viking in the Danelaw. Henry II used the jury in the second part of the 12 century. Initially a jury was 12 people chosen by the accused to prove he was innocent. Gradually the role of the jury changed; the members did not testify but judged the evidence given by witnesses.

¹² For example a hot iron rod was put on the suspect's tongue, if he was burned by it he was considered guilty.

¹³ Men fighting with each other with archaic weapon – the one who won is the one who is right.

¹⁴ The Crusades took place in the 12th and 13th century. They were a series of military expeditions undertaken by the countries of Western Europe to restore the Holy Land to Christian rule.

During the King's absence England was ruled by **Archbishop Hubert Walter** who promoted the new middle class – craftsmen and merchants who grew rich on trade with different parts of the world. The Archbishop granted charters to various towns under royal jurisdiction, which meant that the towns received the right to be self-governing.

Richard did not have a son, and after his death, his tyrannical brother **John** ascended the throne. The antipathy for John cut across class lines – nobles, merchants and churchmen alike disliked him. Under John – notorious for his greediness – everybody had to pay higher taxes. He was also in a state of dispute with the Church because the Pope appointed the Archbishop without his consent. Finally he lost control over Normandy, where some English nobles still had possessions, which further compromised his reputation. When in 1215 he made an effort to recover Normandy and asked his nobles to fight for him, they turned against him and marched to London where they were joined by angry merchants. Outside London John was forced to sign **Magna Carta, the Great Chart of English Freedom**¹⁵ – an agreement regulating the relations between the Crown and the upper and middle classes that later came to be regarded as the cornerstone of English civil liberties. The two most important matters covered by this agreement were these: firstly no free man could be arrested and imprisoned except by the law of the land, and when arrested, he had the right to a fair and legal trial; secondly, no taxation could be made without the approval of the council. Although these statements may seem progressive for those times, the Chart gave more freedom to few people in the country (serfs, who were not freemen, did not benefit from it at all and they were the largest class in medieval society). Magna Carta was merely an attempt to exert a degree of control over the king's actions to prevent him from being a ruthless tyrant. Still it was a turning point in English history because it marked the beginning of the decline of feudalism. In forcing the king to sign this document the nobles for the first time acted not as the king's vassals but as a self-conscious class, and the organization of society into classes was typical of modern, not feudal, times. Another extraordinary thing about this mutiny was the unprecedented cooperation between upper and middle classes. For the first time in history people sided with the Barons and against the Crown. The Londoners opened the gates of the city for rebels while the clergy gave them their moral support. Magna Carta therefore showed the potential strength of the middle class and set England on the course to **constitutional monarchy**, in which the power of the crown is put in the hands of the community at large.

John's son, **Henry III**, tried to get rid of Magna Carta. The rebellion which ensued under the leadership of **Simon de Montfort** was even more popular than the previous one, and it also included middle classes of town and country. In 1265 Simon de Montfort summoned a council that he called parliament (from the French word *parlement*, meaning talking shop or discussion meeting) and took over the treasury forcing the king to yield. Even though Simon de Montfort was eventually defeated and killed, the gains of Magna Carta were left intact.

Edward I, Henry's son, learnt the lesson from the two rebellions and tried to strike a happy medium between his father's adversaries and his own vision of England's constitution. He summoned the first real **parliament**, based on the idea of representation by not only nobles but also the middle class, which now produced more than fifty percent of the wealth of the country. In 1275 Edward commanded that each shire should send two commoners as representatives. At first this service was grudgingly born by them – the journey

¹⁵ The author of Magna Carta was Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

to **Westminster**, where the king's government was situated, was very long and the matter the king wanted to discuss was most often an increase in taxes. Still the Parliament grew and its functions expanded – in the reign of the first three Edwards it acquired much of its present form. What is more, the constant shuttling of representatives between Westminster and the shires did a lot to bring about the unity of the nation.

Another factor which reinforced the sense of nationhood among the English was **the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453)**, which started during the reign of Edward I. In many respects this war was national, not feudal, in its character. Owing to her insular position and long succession of strong Norman kings, England in the 14th century was a powerful state whose centralization and organization outstripped European monarchies. The corollary of this was England's expansionist policy that was aimed at creating a continental Empire. The armies that were sent to France were very small but successful because France at that time was still an inefficient feudal giant. The war bred a powerful hatred of the French, which was stronger among the common people than among the upper class. This is a remarkable fact because in those times the typical hostility was local, not national in character – it was leveled at neighboring towns, villages or districts, rather than neighboring countries. The anti-French sentiment consolidated the nation and gave rise to national pride and patriotism.

Another positive outcome of the war was the **nobilitation of the English language**¹⁶ and the consequent liberation of English culture from French influence. After the Norman conquest, English was a peasants' dialect, the speech of ignorant serfs. It is not surprising that it was despised and almost ceased to be written. The nobles spoke French and the clergy had Latin. It was during those times that English lost inflections and genders and acquired its present simplicity. At the same time it was enriched by French words relating to different aspects of life such as arts, learning, cooking and courting. During the Hundred Years War numerous French aristocrats were held captive on the island while their families in France were collecting money for ransoms. The captives were treated as guests – they taught Englishmen continental manners and made love to the English ladies, which also left its trace on the English language. But still the common feeling of patriotism made French an enemy's tongue and the Barons, who by then spoke only a caricature of French, finally started to accept English as the language of nobility.

The English effort to build an Empire in Europe had also some negative consequences. The poor bore the brunt of **the Poll Tax** (the tax for war), which led to the **peasants' uprising in 1381**. Eventually, in an ironic about-face, the war strengthened France, which goaded beyond endurance, became conscious of her own national identity. **Joan of Arc**, among others, became a symbol of this new brave and patriotic resistance. Finally, the war in France was one of the reasons of the civil war that broke out in England two years after the last English armies were driven out of France.

Thus in 1453 there were many private armies in England. They were not disbanded by the Barons, who cleverly plotted against one another and used their soldiers in private wars, skirmishes and sieges. The war in France made the Crown very weak because in the time of war the kings were more dependent on the nobles. The Kings did not have

¹⁶ William Caxton must be remembered as the first English printer who helped to elevate the position of the English language. He not only established the first printing press in England but also translated books into English and published in English thus popularizing English as the language of the learned.

their own army and used their vassals' military resources – armies enlisted and paid by the Barons. Therefore for the monarchs to act against the nobles was to act against their own interests. The unrest in the country finally took the form of a civil war, called **the War of Roses (1455–1487)** between the House of Lancaster (a red rose in its flag) and the House of York (a white rose in its flag) both of which descended from Edward III and now wanted to take possession of the Crown. The war had in a sense a limited scope – the combatants were the noblemen who were claimants of the throne, their relatives and supporters. Therefore the war did not affect the middle class or ordinary people who passively watched the events, totally unconcerned about which party would win the throne. The most famous incident in the war was the murder of **Edward IV's** two sons imprisoned in the Tower of London. Their alleged murderer was their uncle, Richard of Gloucester, who crowned himself as **Richard II**. But he had many enemies who eventually proposed their own candidate to the throne – **Henry Tudor**, Earl of Richmond from Wales. He had a very weak title to the throne but was an excellent leader and he managed to defeat Richard in **the battle of Bosworth (1485)**, and after marrying the sister of the killed boys, as Henry VII he established the greatest of all English royal lines – the House of Tudors.

3: Life in Medieval Britain

In the early Middle Ages, the civilization of Europe was Christian, feudal and cosmopolitan. In the late Middle Ages, however, Europe witnessed **the emergence of nationhood**. England was a champion in this long and complex process, and already in the 14th century she was no longer an amalgamation of the French upper class and Anglo-Saxon peasants but a homogenous social and cultural unit. English was generally accepted and understood by all the citizens regardless of their social rank, and English culture and literature, even though still derivative of French and Italian models, started to tackle English themes and develop its own styles, as it was the case with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

English national identity was forged through numerous wars, not only with the French but also with their closest neighbors: the Irish, The Scottish and the Welsh. **The Normans annexed Ireland**¹⁷ but like Wales it was repeatedly trying to throw off English rule. **Scotland** due to her geographical formation (mountain ranges and islands), even though it was weaker than England, was a country difficult to conquer and to rule. The Scottish kings successfully defended themselves from the English attempts to subdue them but finally started to seek allies to increase their security. The most obvious ally was France, also on a warpath with England since 1337. In 1346 bound by the alliance with France, the

¹⁷ Henry II conquered Ireland in 1169 but the control over the island was very tentative.

Scottish King raided England but was defeated, captured and bought off by the French. This incident temporarily put an end to the unrest on the northern frontier and fortified English national pride. The Border War (the feuds and cattle raiding in the territories bordering with Scotland) did not end for good until 1603 when the Union of the English and the Scottish Crown took place.

The break-up of the feudal system was an important step on the path towards full national self-awareness. In the late Middle Ages, England started to develop new social classes and a modern social system. There were still serfs, but they more and more emphatically demanded that all men should be free. Those who had already enjoyed freedom were constantly on strike for higher wages. The strikes were no longer directed against feudal landowners but independent farmers, manufactures and merchants, that is, the new middle-classes of the town and the country.

The ‘natural economy’, characteristic for a feudal system, was giving way to a ‘money economy.’ In **the country** the system of monetary payment gradually replaced customary service – money wages and farm leases substituted for the system of servile tenure, which forced the serfs to labor on the lord’s field, not their own soil. Both the lords and independent farmers noticed that hired men working on the field all year around, whose wages were paid from tenants’ rents, were far more efficient than reluctant serfs. In some parts of England, the lords’ customary rights were given up as early as the 12th century, but then the process was frequently reversed in the 13th century when the rapid increase in population made it possible for the lord to drive harder bargains with the peasants, who competed with one another for the lease of the lord’s fields necessary for their own sustenance. Therefore for some time field-service was again more vigorously reinforced by the lords who put it as a prerequisite for the tenure of other lands.

But then the tide turned once more due to **the Black Death (1348–1349)** a terrible plague that decimated the population of the island. One third or maybe even a half of the inhabitants of the island died in just two years. It was not until the 17th century that the population reached the number of four million inhabitants from before the plague. The plague on the land speeded the transition from a society of semi-bondsmen into a society in which all, at least legally, were free. The shortage of men to cultivate the land reduced the value of land and increased the value of labor and put the surviving peasants in a much stronger position. The lord not only found it difficult to find people to work on his land but also was saddled with the land which had been previously in lease and which went back to him because of the death of the families who had farmed it. The peasants, who before had been bound to the soil and could not even leave their village without their lord’s consent, when pressed to fulfill their duties to the lord, started to flee to derelict villages in some remote part of the shire where jobs were in abundance and nobody asked any questions. In this way the new class of independent yeomen farmers was born. They used the money they earned from the lord to buy their own farms or lease the land from the lord, getting rich on it very fast. Gradually they started to step in the place of the lords, employing landless laborers to cultivate their lands. In this way the gap between the lord and the peasant that characterized the society in the feudal time disappeared, but a new division surfaced: between the yeomen farmers who were employers and wage laborers who were the employed.

Of course the abolition of serfdom did not always go unchallenged. In the areas where the lords were particularly recalcitrant in exacting field dues there were occasional acts of

violence. The peasants were supported by bands of outlaws (like Robin Hood) hiding in still vast forests. **The uprisings** were supported by the small clergy, often of peasant origin, and were directed against wealthy churchmen and the upper class alike. The biggest of these rebellions happened in 1381, triggered by the increase of the Poll Tax to three times the previous amount. At first different bands of rebels raided manors and monasteries in East England and in Kent, driving nobles, prelates and abbots to the woods from which the outlaws had just emerged. Then a precedent took place – the bands united and marched to London, where, with the aid of the poor of the city, they murdered some of the most unpopular nobles. The force of the uprising shocked the middle class, and Richard II promised to meet their demands, but after the rebels peacefully went home, the king and the nobles plucked up their courage and took a terrible revenge. The memory of the nightmarish four-week revolt lingered with the nobles, making them a bit more responsive to the plight of the poor. After the revolt the movement for the emancipation of the serf continued until the village became a modern community with a squire, who frequently did not have his own farm and lived on lease money, wealthy farmers and craftsmen, and finally farmhands, who were free but landless. When the old feudal system of Sheriffs was replaced with the institution of the Justices of the Peace, local nobles appointed by the king to rule the county¹⁸ in his name, the change from feudal to modern society was complete.

In the 14th century **the town** was still an agricultural community very similar to that of the village. The city-dwellers were craftsmen, manufacturers, and merchants who during harvest lay their work aside to work on the fields and meadows which were beyond the city walls. The number of inhabitants of an average town varied from 2.000 to 3.000 people – the number could change dramatically due to not infrequent plagues resulting from the unsanitary conditions. But life in the town was not unpleasant; there were the poor but there were no slums.

In towns, like in villages, people were engaged in numerous mutual antagonisms. Wage earners were against merchants and manufacturers, but they could rally, guided by civic patriotism, against all newcomers threatening their common interests, against other towns competing in trade, or against the greatest enemies of all: the lords, bishops and monks who always tried to impinge of the towns' privilege of self-government.

London was the biggest city of all, practically a state within a state. **Westminster** was two miles away from London and was considered to be the center of royal administration and law. The king, who borrowed money from Londoners, put the richest citizens on par with nobles and protected their monopoly for trade. In 1290 Edward I expelled **Jews** from England to make it possible for the English middle class to grow. This is probably one of the reasons why anti-Semitism in England was not as strong as in other countries, whose middle classes could not compete with the gifted Jews on equal terms.

The main source of wealth, both in the village and in the town, was the production of **wool and cloth**, which had a tradition reaching back to the times of ancient Britons. England was a power in wool production – the greatest sheep stocks were counted in thousands and every farm had a stock. Initially England exported only wool and produced cloth only for her own market. Gradually, however, cloth became England's main export. In the reign of Edward II and Edward III the government took control over the nation's

¹⁸ The county is the smallest unit of administration.

main industry (second only to agriculture) – the importation of cloth from abroad was prohibited and foreign weavers were encouraged to settle in England under special privileges. In the late Middle Ages the production of cloth trebled and England became the main supplier to the world's cloth market. The development of the cloth trade had many corollaries for England's economy and social life. It gave rise to the middle class in the town and the village; it alleviated the poverty of the landless proletariat; finally it contributed to the growth of the commercial fleet, which went into different corners of the world to sell English cloth.

Initially the cloth industry was organized by **guilds**, associations of merchants, who wanted to protect their interest against other workers and to guard the monopoly of their trade against other towns. Gradually it became clear that guilds could not cope with the organization of production and exportation. The manufacture in fact required more than one craft – spinning, weaving or dyeing. From these days the English became rich in metaphors connected with the work of Webster. 'Thread of discourse', 'spin a yarn', 'unravel a mystery', 'web of life', 'homespun' and 'spinster' are just a few phrases whose etymology goes back to weaving.

Thus in the late Middle Ages potent forces were reshaping English society and English institutions. **Parliament** was modernized and the power of commoners representing the new middle class was growing, and the only institution that remained intact outside the reforms was **the Church**. The Church was as conservative as ever and resented all changes, as all of them were aimed at reducing its power. The ever increasing wealth of the Church and its untouchable privileges grated on the nerves of many people – the commoners, who criticized the corruption of the Church, and noblemen, who were now as well educated as the clergymen and eager to take over the church's position in the state government. Bishops were 'ministers' of state, whereas clergymen of lower rank did all the secretarial work.

The Church itself was prey to many inner antagonisms most notably between parishioners and high churchmen who were interested more in politics than in the deplorable condition of the Church.

The main reason why people hated the Church was the greediness of churchmen. Absolution was given for money and the Spiritual Courts that dealt with wills, marriages and sexual irregularities often commuted penance for money, thus practically blackmailing sinners. Parishioners often employed substitutes to run the parish for them, while they indulged in a luxurious life in London, Oxford, or an aristocrat's house. Ordinary people therefore often turned to traveling Pardoners, selling relics from Rome or to heretical missionaries. Many of them were **Lollards** and represented the first English religious movement called '**premature reformation**' because of its resemblance to Protestantism.

Lollardy was founded by **John Wycliffe**, a scholar from Oxford who at the end of the 14th century denied the doctrine of transubstantiation¹⁹ and was driven out of Oxford. Wycliffe was the first to translate the Bible to English because he thought that everyone, not only clergy, should be able to know it and live by the word of God. He was never allowed to publish his Bible and his followers were persecuted, but the popular movement they initiated was never completely wiped out, and in Lutheran times Lollards joined the ranks of the Lutheran movement. Another evangelical force in the nation were friars

¹⁹ The belief that during the mass the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

who were also very outspoken about the sloth of bishops, monks and clergy. In their work there are to be found early traits of English Puritanism such as asceticism, stirring sermons, all-out war on sin, and renunciation of Church hierarchy.

One-third of the wealth of the entire country was in the hands of the Church, and much of it was invested in monasteries where monks lived a very comfortable life. The monasteries were no longer centers of learning, and the chronicles that the monks produced were no longer capable of grasping the importance of the times. The monks did not take part in the political life of the country and generally lived the life of an average nobleman – they had armies of servants in the monasteries, which they often left, and, dressed smartly as laymen, they wandered, hunted or played field sports. Needless to say they were unchaste.

The sins of the Church's pride and luxury were nowhere more visible than in the ever enlarged and perfected monasteries or beautiful late medieval churches, which contrary to small and dark Norman churches, delighted the congregation with their spaciousness and breathtaking stain-glass windows. **The medieval ecclesiastical architecture** was a great heirloom to the English nation.

Another positive aspect of the medieval Church activity was its **educational activity**. Grammar schools run by the Church were still the only possibility of a career for ambitious boys from the lower classes. Many of them became later clerks, half-clergy who did secretarial work and were expected not to marry. The clerks were particularly undisciplined and were often the source of amorous or criminal scandals, which also contributed to tarnishing the Church's reputation.

Besides grammar schools there were no attempts to teach the population. **Oxford and Cambridge**, the two ancient universities in England, already existed (Cambridge rose to national importance a little bit later in the 15th and 16th century). The University community consisted of two mutually hostile parties: clerks and regular clergy. They were all, however, rallied against the town's people, and skirmishes between students and inhabitants were not a rarity. In 1355 the goaded inhabitants of Oxford virtually slaughtered both students and scholars. The king intervened to avenge them, but the truth was that the lifestyle of students, who did not abstain from taverns and brothels, made them hardly bearable neighbors. The excesses in the universities stopped after the **college system** had been introduced. Colleges were academic homes where young people were supervised (before they had rented apartments all over the town). The colleges put an end to scandalous incidents and improved the morals and discipline among students. The only learned men who were taught outside universities were lawyers, who were educated in **the Inns of Court in Westminster**.