

# KING CHARLES I AND HIS PARLIAMENTS: THE ROAD TO CIVIL WAR

by  
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The reign of King Charles I began badly. His first Parliament of 1625 was a complete failure and from this unpromising beginning his relationship with Parliament progressively deteriorated. He delayed reform and failed to obtain the finance essential for his governmental programme. During the eleven years of his personal rule (1629-40) he failed to call a parliament, and when he did so in 1640 its deliberations led to civil war and ultimately to his own death by execution. Unfortunately from the very beginning Parliament proved hostile to him; presenting their grievances while refusing to grant appropriate levels of taxation. Whereas from 1414 a king's right to collect Tonnage & Poundage had normally been granted to each monarch for life, this was discussed during Charles's first Parliament as a possible grant for one year only, but then refused altogether.

During the eleven years when the king failed to call Parliament he raised funds by illegal means such as Tonnage & Poundage, forced loans and the Ship-Money tax. The Cornish MP Sir John Eliot, who had refused to contribute to a forced loan and who was also highly critical of the Duke of Buckingham, was imprisoned. He had referred to the king's favourite as a 'Sejanus serving a Tiberius' which naturally angered the king, but the death of Eliot in the Tower in 1632 blackened the reputation of the king in the eyes of many MPs. John Hampden, a Buckinghamshire landowner and MP for the county, became a national hero by standing trial, after refusing to pay the Ship-Money tax levied on part of his property during the second writ of Ship-Money in 1635. This tax proved difficult to collect since it had traditionally been raised only from maritime counties, so that the landed gentry of inland estates were particularly unwilling to make such payments.

At the time the king was presumed to be collecting Ship-Money to meet his personal expenses. He had certainly developed an expensive interest in art, architecture and drama, having purchased the art collection of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua; treasures later sold by the Commonwealth at knock-down prices during the Interregnum. However, Mary Gordon's research into the expenditure records of Ship-Money demonstrates that these taxes were indeed used for naval expenses during the 1630s. (*See note 1*). Furthermore, even in times of peace, piracy, wrecking and smuggling certainly necessitated an English navy. For example the naval expedition under William Rainborowe MP in March 1637 led to the release of 293 English sailors held in slavery by Barbary pirates. This successful action followed a four month blockade of the port of Sale in Morocco, and was entirely funded by ship money. (*See note 2*).

Charles encouraged the High Church party within the Anglican Church to enhance the liturgy with rituals and vestments, and attempted to enforce conformity of worship throughout his three kingdoms, which was deeply unpopular with the Calvinists. The King himself was not of the Roman Catholic persuasion but his French-born wife Henrietta Maria (the sister of King Louis XIII of France) was, and consequently considered her husband's religion as a heresy, while the Calvinists and Presbyterians considered him to be a closet papist. Charles may well have planned to continue his personal rule indefinitely, but his determination to impose a prayer book on the Presbyterian Church of Scotland led to a Scottish invasion of the north of England in 1640 which necessitated the recall of the English Parliament to obtain funds for war. It produced no more common ground between Crown and Commons than the Parliaments of the 1620s, for the finances of the king were now utterly exhausted while Parliament was prepared only to discuss grievances rather than vote taxes. Consequently even before the English Civil War began, a state of war already existed in both Scotland and Ireland.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1642 Charles entered the House of Commons with an armed guard and attempted to arrest five members; John Pym, John Hampden and three others whom the king regarded as his principal opposition. However, they had been alerted in advance, and escaped by river. In August 1642, after a series of abortive negotiations with Parliament, Charles raised his standard at Nottingham. John Hampden was mortally wounded on the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1643 in an early Civil War engagement at Chalgrove Field, dying at Thame in Oxfordshire a few days later. Pym died of cancer on 8<sup>th</sup> December of the same year. Alas for the king and subsequent English history, they were replaced by men much less willing to continue what they saw as futile negotiations with a monarch they considered to be a tyrant. By 1648 Oliver Cromwell and his son-in-law, Henry Ireton, held supreme power with the Army at their backs and were intent on the permanent removal of the king.

At the Restoration in 1660, perhaps bearing in mind Charles's personal belief in 'the divine right of kings', a few Anglican churches were re-dedicated to 'Charles King & Martyr' but on the whole history does not afford him a good reputation. He was a complex man whose actions were often misjudged. Elements of the

shy boy of his youth remained in his adult personality so that he withdrew from contact with many in his court, thereby losing their personal support. His ideas were often badly presented and consequently misunderstood. He was not a bad man but he proved an ineffective monarch. He was not good at managing his Parliaments, but this was not entirely his fault since there were deep seated problems which had been left unsettled throughout the two previous reigns. The long bloody Civil Wars which he launched involved all three kingdoms. Before its end the king himself was dead, having been publically beheaded before the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1649. Following his defeat in battle he had also proved inept and untrustworthy in negotiation, acquiring an unfortunate reputation for duplicity. He died for his principles which were not those upon which a constitutional monarchy could have been founded.

#### NOTES

- (1) Gordon M.D. *The Collection of Ship-Money in the Reign of Charles I, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Third Series Vol. 4 (1910) pp.141-162.
- (2) Tinniswood A. *Pirates of Barbary*, London, Jonathan Cape (2010) pp. 150-163