

What was England like in 1603?

Read pages 8-11 and answer the following questions in full sentences and in detail.

A. English society c. 1600

1. How many people lived in England by 1603?
2. What proportion of people lived in rural areas?
3. Where were the major cities in England at this time?
4. What challenges had affected English society in the 16th century?
5. Why was the idea of the Great Chain of Being important?

B. Government

Role of the monarch

6. Make a list of the monarch's key powers and responsibilities.
7. Does our current monarch Queen Elizabeth II still have any of these powers or responsibilities?

How government worked

8. Why did the Government have to rely heavily on obedience and persuasion?
9. How else did the monarchy try to secure the allegiance of its subjects?
10. What was the 'political nation'?
11. How was the monarch able to win the loyalty of its subjects? What rewards did it offer?

The machinery of government

12. Copy Figure 1.2
13. In today's society, which organisations or people carry out the jobs of:
 - a) The Justices of the Peace
 - b) The Lords Lieutenant
 - c) The Privy Council

1 The Stuart inheritance

In 1603, James VI of Scotland inherited the throne of England from his cousin, Elizabeth I. Although he had enjoyed a relatively successful reign as King of Scotland, his new kingdom presented quite a different set of challenges. England was larger, wealthier and more heavily populated than Scotland, and was a far more significant player on the international stage. It also differed significantly in its religious, political and economic make-up. James was fully aware of England's relative wealth, a prospect that he apparently relished, likening himself to a 'poor man' who had finally arrived in 'the land of promise'. However, in order to provide his subjects with effective government, he would also need to develop an understanding of other aspects of England's make-up.

English society c. 1600

England by 1603 was a society facing considerable strain. Despite the fact that the previous century had witnessed a dramatic population rise, from around 2.8 million to over 5 million inhabitants between the 1520s and 1640s, there had been little change in the pattern of life for most people. Ninety per cent of the population still lived in rural areas and were dependent on agriculture for their means of existence. Although London was the largest city in the country, with a population of around 200,000 by 1600, there were only two other cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, Norwich and Bristol. Five others had populations of over 5,000, namely Oxford, Salisbury, York, Newcastle and Exeter.

The sixteenth century had also been a time of rapid inflation, and although wages had risen during the period, they had failed to keep pace with prices. This, together with the increase in population, led to an inevitable rise in both poverty and vagrancy in the later sixteenth century, which caused considerable alarm to the governments of the time. Harvest failure could still lead to starvation and serious disorder, which the country had experienced as recently as the 1590s.

In light of such pressures, the Government was keen to maintain the social fabric of the country, as far as possible. A hierarchical social structure was regarded as a guarantor of stability, and this hierarchy was regarded as part of God's divinely appointed plan for society. The importance of such ideas is reflected in the belief in a Great Chain of Being (see Figure 1.1). As God had arranged the universe in a certain order, the structure of society should reflect this in its own composition.



Figure 1.1 The Great Chain of Being, illustration from *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579)

'The homily of obedience', read regularly in Tudor and Stuart churches, went on to apply this principle to society as a whole:

Almighty God hath created and appointed all things in heaven, earth, and waters, in a most excellent and perfect order ... in earth He hath assigned and appointed kings, princes, with other governors under them in necessary order ... some are in high order, some in low, some kings and princes, some inferiors and subjects, priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor: and everyone hath need of the other: so that in all things is to be lauded and praised the goodly order of God.

In particular, there was a sense of the threat posed by landless vagrants, victims of economic change, whose lifestyle meant that they were beyond the traditional control mechanisms of society. As one magistrate from Somerset warned in 1596:

I do not see how it is possible for the poor countryman to bear the burdens duly laid on him, and the plundering of the infinite numbers of the wicked, wandering idle people of the land. ... Others there be ... which may grow dangerous, by the aid of such numbers as are [vagabonds], especially in this time of famine, who no doubt animate them to all contempt both of noblemen and gentlemen, continually whispering in their ears that rich men have gotten all into their hands and will starve the poor.

In response to this threat, a series of Poor Laws was introduced. These included a range of measures designed to alleviate poverty and to punish those who sought to escape it by moving out of their home areas. William Harrison, in 1587, described graphically how such legislation was to work:

There is order taken throughout every parish in the realm that weekly collection shall be made for the help and sustenance of the poor, to the end that they should not scatter and, by begging here and there, annoy both town and country. ... Such as idle beggars ... the law ordaineth this manner of correction: the rogue being apprehended, committed to prison, and tried ... if he happen to be convicted for a vagabond ... he is then ... grievously whipped and burned through the gristle of the right ear with an hot iron ... if he be taken a second time, he shall then be whipped again, bored likewise through the other ear, and set to service; from whence if he depart before a year be expired and happen afterward to be [caught] again, he is condemned to suffer pains of death.

(William Harrison, *The Description of England*, 1587)

Government

Role of monarch

As Head of State and Church, the powers and responsibilities James inherited as King of England were enormous. Government revolved around the monarch and was *its* Government. As Defender of the Faith, the monarch appointed archbishops and

bishops, and directed ecclesiastical policy. Judges and magistrates were appointed by the Crown to uphold *its* laws. The monarch directed foreign and domestic policy, chose its ministers, raised and controlled armies, and decided if and when to call the people's representatives together in Parliament. Parliaments were usually summoned to provide the Crown with financial assistance, but the ultimate responsibility for finance also belonged to the monarch. Any financial difficulties would lead to a Crown debt rather than a national one, for which the monarch was responsible.

How Government worked

Lacking a standing army, an effective police force or a professional civil service in the localities, the Government was heavily dependent on persuasion to enforce its will. As we have seen, the idea of a Great Chain of Being was an important one at this time, and one that Government propaganda developed. 'The homily of obedience' emphasised the monarch's divinely appointed right to issue orders that their subjects must obey. Failure to do so would lead to anarchy: 'no man shall ride or go on the highway unrobbed; no man shall sleep in his own house or bed unkilld; no man shall keep his wife, children, and possessions'.

In addition the monarchy placed great emphasis on visual propaganda to try and secure the allegiance of its subjects. The projection of the royal image through coinage and portraiture, and of royal magnificence and wealth through architecture and Court ritual were designed to impress and inspire loyalty. The most important targets of this were 'the political nation', a relatively small group of men, whose support was vital to effective government of the country. However, this group's adherence could not be ensured by persuasion alone. The monarch had also to help meet the social and financial aspirations of such people. To do this, James would need to bear in mind the advice that Lord Burghley gave to his predecessor, that it was necessary 'that you gratify your nobility and principal persons of your realm and bind them fast to you ... whereby you shall have all the men of value in your realm to depend only upon yourself'.

In order to 'bind' such figures to it, the Crown needed to be able to offer sufficient incentives for loyalty. The distribution of such patronage was a very important aspect of government. The Crown had a vast array of rewards at its disposal: offices in Church, Court or Government; honours, such as peerages or knighthoods; leases or gifts of royal lands; the grant of monopolies on the manufacture or trade of a particular commodity; pensions and annuities; or even gifts of money. These privileges were vital to both Crown and recipient, providing loyalty and service for one, and prestige and wealth for the other. An effective patronage machine would ensure that such benefits were spread widely to ensure the maximum possible coverage of the political nation, and would avoid the over-concentration of power in one particular group or faction.

The machinery of Government

The actual machinery of Government at the disposal of the monarch was relatively limited. At a central level, the most important institution was the Privy Council, which provided the monarch with advice and implemented royal policy. Great officeholders, such as the Lord Treasurer, or Secretary of State, would usually sit on the Privy Council, and were influential figures in Court as well. The Court, although not part of the Government machine as such, was also an important source of advice to the monarch,

and the main channel through which patronage was distributed. A number of central courts also sat in London, which dealt, among other things, with the enforcement of the monarch's rights and the settlement of constitutional issues. When summoned, Parliament could pass legislation and provide access to important tax revenues.

Local government was the responsibility of three main sets of office-holders: Sheriffs, Lords Lieutenant and Justices of the Peace (JPs). All were unpaid, and usually drawn from gentry backgrounds. It was these individuals upon whom the Crown had to rely, in order to keep order and to ensure that its policies were actually put into effect.

The operations of Government can be summarised in Figure 1.2.

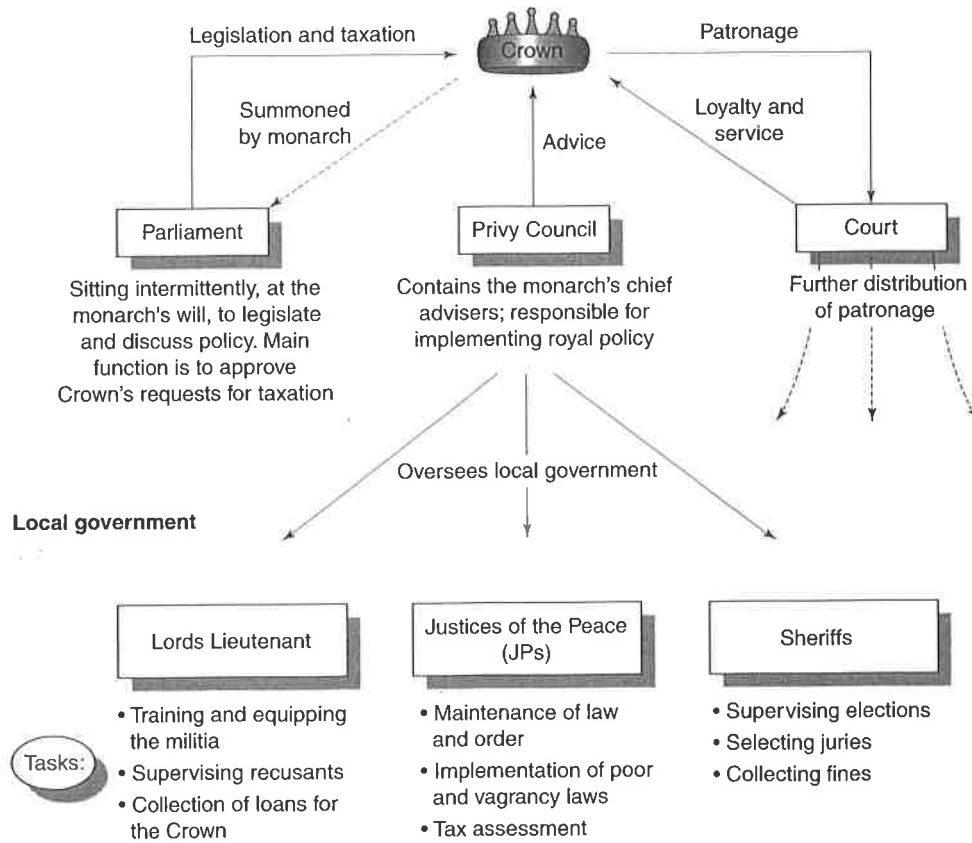


Figure 1.2 An outline of Government structure, c. 1600

Government by 1603

While Elizabethan government was remarkably successful given the constraints under which it was operating, there were certain issues evident by 1603. One was the importance of ensuring a wide distribution of patronage, and avoiding a monopoly over it, or Government, by any one individual or group. According to one contemporary, Elizabeth 'ruled much by faction and parties which herself both made, upheld, and weakened, as her own judgment advised'. The tensions that accompanied the rise of the