

# The eighteenth century

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## 16 The political world

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Well before the end of the eighteenth century Britain was as powerful as France. This resulted from the growth of its industries and from the wealth of its large new trading empire, part of which had been captured from the French. Britain now had the strongest navy in the world; the navy controlled Britain's own trade routes and endangered those of its enemies. It was the deliberate policy of the government to create this trading empire, and to protect it with a strong navy. This was made possible by the way in which government had developed during the eighteenth century.

For the first time, it was the king's ministers who were the real policy and decision-makers. Power now belonged to the groups from which the ministers came, and their supporters in Parliament. These ministers ruled over a country which had become wealthy through trade. This wealth, or "capital", made possible both an agricultural and an industrial revolution which made Britain the most advanced economy in the world.

However, there was an enormous price to pay, because while a few people became richer, many others lost their land, their homes and their way of life. Families were driven off the land in another period of enclosures. They became the working

"proletariat" of the cities that made Britain's trade and industrial empire of the nineteenth century possible. The invention of machinery destroyed the old "cottage industries" and created factories. The development of industry led to the sudden growth of cities like Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool and other centres in the north Midlands.

None of this could have happened without great danger to the established order. In France the misery of the poor and the power of the trading classes led to revolution in 1789. The British government was afraid of dangerous revolutionary ideas spreading from France to the discontented in Britain. In fact, Britain ended the century fighting against the great French leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, and eventually defeating him. In this way, perhaps, many who might have been discontented were more concerned with the defeat of Napoleon. Revolution was still a possibility, but Britain was saved partly by the high level of local control of the ruling class in the countryside and partly by Methodism, a new religious movement which offered hope and self-respect to the new proletariat. Methodism was careful to deal only with heavenly matters. It did not question political or social injustices on earth.

### Politics and finance

When Queen Anne, the last of the Stuarts, died in 1714, it was not entirely certain that the Protestant ruler of Hanover, George, would become king. There were some Tories who wanted the deposed

*The port of Bristol in the eighteenth century. International trade became the basis of Britain's rise to world greatness during the century. Britain had the best ships and also the guns to force its will where trade alone did not succeed. Bristol became the second largest city after London early in the century, based on the triangular trade: British-made goods to West Africa, West African slaves to the New World, and New World sugar, cotton and tobacco to Britain.*

James II's son to return to Britain as James III. If he had given up Catholicism and accepted the Anglican religion he probably would have been crowned James III. But like other members of his family, James was unwilling to change his mind, and he would not give up his religion. Nor would he give up his claim to the throne, so he tried to win it by force.

In 1715 he started a rebellion against George I, who had by this time arrived from Hanover. But the rebellion was a disaster, and George's army had little difficulty in defeating the English and Scottish "Jacobites", as Stuart supporters were known. Because of the Tory connection with the Jacobites, King George allowed the Whigs to form his government.

Government power was increased because the new king spoke only German, and did not seem very interested in his new kingdom. Among the king's ministers was Robert Walpole, who remained the greatest political leader for over twenty years. He is considered Britain's first Prime Minister.

Walpole came to power as a result of his financial ability. At the end of the seventeenth century the government had been forced to borrow money in order to pay for the war with France. There was nothing new about this, except that because of the war the government's borrowing increased enormously. In 1694, a group of financiers who lent to the government decided to establish a bank, and the government agreed to borrow from it alone. The new bank, called the Bank of England, had authority to raise money by printing "bank notes". This was not an entirely new idea. For hundreds of years bankers and money dealers had been able to give people "promisory notes" signed by themselves. These could be handed on as payment to a third or fourth person. This way of making trade easier had been made lawful during the reign of Henry I, six hundred years earlier. The cheques we use today developed from these promisory notes.

At a time when many people had money to invest, there was popular interest in financial matters. People wanted to invest money in some of the trading companies doing business in the West

Indies, the East Indies or in other newly developing areas. The possibility of high profits, and the excitement this possibility caused, made the cost of a share in these trading adventures expensive. In 1720 the South Sea Company offered to pay off the government's national debt if it was given monopoly rights to trading in the South Seas. It raised money by selling shares which quickly rose in value with the increasing excitement. When people's confidence in the South Sea Company suddenly fell, so did the price of shares, and thousands of people who had invested their money lost everything. Robert Walpole was able to bring back public confidence. He made sure that something like the "South Sea Bubble" could not happen again. This was the first step in making companies responsible to the public for the money which they borrowed by the sale of shares.

In the other countries of Europe kings and queens had absolute power. Britain was unusual, and Walpole was determined to keep the Crown under the firm control of Parliament. He knew that with the new German monarchy this was more possible than it had been before.

Walpole skilfully developed the idea that government ministers should work together in a small group, which was called the "Cabinet". He introduced the idea that any minister who disagreed deeply with other Cabinet ministers was expected to resign. From this basic idea grew another important rule in British politics: that all members of the Cabinet were together responsible for policy decisions. Walpole built on the political results of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. It was he who made sure that the power of the king would always be limited by the constitution.

The limits to monarchy were these: the king could not be a Catholic; the king could not remove or change laws; the king was dependent on Parliament for his financial income and for his army. The king was supposed to "choose" his ministers. Even today the government of Britain is "Her Majesty's Government". But in fact the ministers belonged as much to Parliament as they did to the king.

Walpole wanted to avoid war and to increase taxes so that the government could pay back everything it had borrowed, and get rid of the national debt. He put taxes on luxury goods, such as tea, coffee and chocolate, all of which were drunk by the rich, and were brought to Britain from its new colonies by wealthy traders. Tea had become a national drink by 1700, when 50,000 kg were already being imported each year. Walpole raised the government's income, but this had little effect on the national debt, and he became very unpopular.

The most important of Walpole's political enemies was William Pitt "the Elder", later Lord Chatham. Chatham wanted Britain to be economically strong in the world, and he agreed with Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, who had written in 1728, "Trade is the wealth of the world. Trade makes the difference between rich and poor, between one nation and another." But trade also involved competition. Chatham had studied French trade and industry, and he was certain that Britain must beat France in the race for an overseas trade empire.

In 1733 France made an alliance with Spain. Chatham feared that this alliance would give France a trade advantage over Britain through freer trade possibilities with the Spanish Empire in South America and the Far East. England had been trying unsuccessfully to develop trade with the Spanish Empire since the days of Drake. Once Chatham was in the government, he decided to make the British navy stronger than that of France or any other nation. He also decided to take over as many as possible of France's trading posts abroad.

War with France broke out in 1756. Britain had already been involved in a war against France, from 1743 to 1748, concerning control of the Austrian Empire. However, this time Chatham left Britain's ally, Prussia, to do most of the fighting in Europe. He directed British effort at destroying French trade. The navy stopped French ships reaching or leaving French ports.

The war against France's trade went on all over the world. In Canada, the British took Quebec in 1759 and Montreal the following year. This gave the

British control of the important fish, fur and wood trades. Meanwhile the French navy was destroyed in a battle near the coast of Spain. In India, the army of the British East India Company defeated French armies both in Bengal, and in the south near Madras, destroying French trade interests. Many Indian princes allied themselves with one side or the other. In defeating France, Britain eventually went on to control most of India by conquest or treaty with the princes. Many Britons started to go to India to make their fortune. Unlike previous British traders, they had little respect for Indian people or for their culture. So, while India became the "jewel in the Crown" of Britain's foreign possessions, British-Indian relations slowly went sour.

Meanwhile, in 1759, Britain was drunk with victory. "One is forced to ask every morning what victory there is for fear of missing one," an Englishman said at the time. British pride had already been noticed by a Swiss visitor in 1727. The British have a very high opinion of themselves, he wrote, and they "think nothing is as well done elsewhere as in their own country". British pride was expressed in a national song written in 1742: "Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves, Britons never never never shall be slaves."

But a new king, George III, came to the throne in 1760. He did not wish Chatham to continue an expensive war. In 1763 George III made peace with France. Britain did this without informing Prussia, which was left to fight France alone.

For the rest of the century, Britain's international trade increased rapidly. By the end of the century the West Indies were the most profitable part of Britain's new empire. They formed one corner of a profitable trade triangle. British-made knives, swords and cloth were taken to West Africa and exchanged for slaves. These were taken to the West Indies, and the ships returned to Britain carrying sugar which had been grown by slaves. Britain's colonies were an important marketplace in which the British sold the goods they produced, from the eighteenth century until the end of the empire in the twentieth century.

independent of Britain. Burke, who himself held a mixture of both radical and conservative views, argued that the king and his advisers were once again too powerful, and that Parliament needed to get back proper control of policy.

## Ireland

James II's defeat by William of Orange in 1690 had severe and long-term effects on the Irish people. Over the next half century the Protestant parliament in Dublin passed laws to prevent the Catholics from taking any part in national life. Catholics could not become members of the Dublin parliament, and could not vote in parliamentary elections. No Catholic could become a lawyer, go to university, join the navy or accept any public post. Catholics were not even allowed to own a horse worth more than £5. It was impossible for Catholics to have their children educated according to their religion, because Catholic schools were forbidden. Although there were still far more Catholics than Protestants, they had now become second-class citizens in their own land.

New laws were passed which divided Catholic families. The son of Catholic parents who became Protestant could take over his parents' property and use it as he wanted. These actions put the Irish Catholic population in the same position as other colonised peoples later on. Hatred between the ruling Protestant settlers and the ruled Catholic Irish was unavoidable.

By the 1770s, however, life had become easier and some of the worst laws against Catholics were removed. But not everyone wanted to give the Catholics more freedom. In Ulster, the northern part of Ireland, Protestants formed the first "Orange Lodges", societies which were against any freedom for the Catholics.

In order to increase British control Ireland was united with Britain in 1801, and the Dublin parliament closed. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland lasted for 120 years. Politicians had promised Irish leaders that when Ireland became part of Britain the Catholics would get

equal voting opportunities. But George III, supported by most Tories and by many Protestant Irish landlords, refused to let this happen.

## Scotland

Scotland also suffered from the efforts of the Stuarts to win back the throne. The first "Jacobite" revolt to win the crown for James II's son, in 1715, had been unsuccessful. The Stuarts tried again in 1745, when James II's grandson, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, better known as "Bonny Prince Charlie", landed on the west coast of Scotland. He persuaded some clan chiefs to join him. Many of these chiefs had great difficulty persuading the men in their clans to join the revolt. Some were told their homes would be burnt if they did not fight. Most clans did not join the rebellion, and nor did the men of the Scottish Lowlands.

Bonny Prince Charlie was more successful at first than anyone could have imagined. His army of Highlanders entered Edinburgh and defeated an English army in a surprise attack. Then he marched south. Panic spread through England, because much of the British army was in Europe fighting the French. But success for Bonny Prince Charlie depended on Englishmen also joining his army. When the Highland army was over halfway to London, however, it was clear that few of the English would join him, and the Highlanders themselves were unhappy at being so far from home. The rebels moved back to Scotland. Early in 1746 they were defeated by the British army at Culloden, near Inverness. The rebellion was finished.

The English army behaved with cruelty. Many Highlanders were killed, even those who had not joined the rebellion. Others were sent to work in America. Their homes were destroyed, and their farm animals killed. The fear of the Highland danger was so great that a law was passed forbidding Highlanders to wear their traditional skirt, the kilt. The old patterns of the kilt, called tartans, and the Scottish musical instrument, the bagpipe, were also forbidden. Some did not obey this law, and were shot.