

Brief History of UK

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- Το παρόν εκπαιδευτικό υλικό έχει αναπτυχθεί στα πλαίσια του εκπαιδευτικού έργου του διδάσκοντα.
- Το έργο «**Ανοικτά Ακαδημαϊκά Μαθήματα στο Ιόνιο Πανεπιστήμιο**» έχει χρηματοδοτήσει μόνο τη αναδιαμόρφωση του εκπαιδευτικού υλικού.
- Το έργο υλοποιείται στο πλαίσιο του Επιχειρησιακού Προγράμματος «Εκπαίδευση και Δια Βίου Μάθηση» και συγχρηματοδοτείται από την Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση (Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινωνικό Ταμείο) και από εθνικούς πόρους.



Με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης

Άδειες Χρήσης

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Periods in English history

- Roman Britain c. 43–410
- Anglo-Saxon c. 500–1066
- Norman 1066–1154
- Plantagenet 1154–1485
- Tudor 1485–1603
- Elizabethan 1558–1603
- Stuart 1603–1714
- Jacobean 1603–1625
- Caroline 1625–1649
- (Interregnum) 1649–1660
- Restoration 1660–1688
- Georgian 1714–1837
- Victorian 1837–1901
- Edwardian 1901–1914
- First World War 1914–1918
- Interwar 1918–1939
- Second World War 1939–1945
- Postwar 1945–present



Prehistory & Antiquity

- England was settled by humans for at least 500,000 years. The first modern humans (*homo sapiens*) arrived during the Ice Age (about 35,000 to 10,000 years ago), when the sea levels were lower and Britain was connected to the European mainland. It is these people who built the ancient megalithic monuments of [Stonehenge](#) and Avebury.
- Between 1,500 and 500 BCE, Celtic tribes migrated from Central Europe and France to Britain and mixed with the indigenous inhabitants, creating a new culture slightly distinct from the Continental Celtic one. This was the Bronze Age.
- The Romans tried a first time to invade *Britannia* (the Latin name of the island) in 55 BCE under Julius Caesar, but weren't successful until 43 CE, during the reign of Emperor Claudius. In 122 CE, Emperor Hadrian built a wall in the north of Britannia to keep the barbarian Picts at bay.
- The Romans controlled most of present-day England and Wales, and founded a large number of cities that still exist today. [London](#), [York](#), [St Albans](#), [Bath](#), [Exeter](#), [Lincoln](#), [Leicester](#), [Worcester](#), [Gloucester](#), [Chichester](#), [Winchester](#), [Colchester](#), [Manchester](#), [Chester](#), [Lancaster](#), were all Roman towns, as in fact were all the cities with names now ending in -chester, -cester or -caster, which derive from Latin *castrum* ("fortification").

The Anglo-Saxons

- The Romans progressively abandoned Britannia in the 5th century as their Empire was falling apart and legions were needed to protect Rome.
- With the Romans gone, the Celtic tribes started fighting with each other again, and one of the local chieftain had the not so brilliant idea to request help from the some Germanic tribes from the North of present-day Germany and South of Denmark. These were the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who arrived in the 5th and 6th centuries.
- However, things did not happen as the Celts had expected. The Germanic tribes did not go back home after the fight, and on the contrary felt strong enough to seize the whole of the country for themselves, which they did, pushing back all the Celtic tribes to Wales and Cornwall, and founding their respective kingdoms of Kent (the Jutes), Essex, Sussex and Wessex (the Saxons), and further north East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria (the Angles). These 7 kingdoms, which rules over all England from about 500 to 850 AD, were later known as the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy.

The Vikings

- From the second half of the 9th century, the Norse from Scandinavia started invading Europe, the Swedes taking up Eastern Europe, Russia (which they founded as a country) and the Byzantine Empire, the Norwegians raiding Scotland and Ireland, discovering and settling in the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland (and were in fact the first Europeans to set foot in America in 1000 AD), while the Danes wrought havoc throughout Western Europe, as far as North Africa.
- The Danes invaded the North-East of England, from Northumberland to East Anglia, and founded a new kingdom known as the Danelaw. Another group of Danes managed to take Paris, and obtain a grant of land from the King of France in 911. This area became the Duchy of Normandy, and its inhabitants were the Normans (from 'North Men' or 'Norsemen', another term for 'Viking').

The Normans

- After having settled in their newly acquired land, the Normans, adopted the French feudal system and French as official language.
- During that time, the Kings of Wessex had resisted and eventually vanquished the Danes in England in the 10th century. But the powerful Canute the Great (995-1035), king of the newly unified Denmark and Norway and overlord of Schleswig and Pomerania, led two other invasions on England in 1013 and 1015, and became king of England in 1016, after crushing the Anglo-Saxon king, Edmund II.
- Edward the Confessor (1004-1066) succeeded to Canute's two sons. He nominated William, Duke of Normandy, as his successor, but upon his death, Harold Godwinson, the powerful Earl of Wessex, crowned himself king. William refused to acknowledge Harold as King and invaded England with 12,000 soldiers in 1066. King Harold was killed at the battle of [Hastings](#) (by an arrow in the eye, as the legend as it), and William the Conqueror become William I of England. His descendants have sat on the throne of England to this day.
- William I (1027-1087) ordered a nationwide survey of land property known as the ***Domesday Book***, and redistributed land among his vassals. Many of the country's medieval castles were built under William's reign (eg. [Dover](#), [Arundel](#), [Windsor](#), [Warwick](#), [Kenilworth](#), [Lincoln](#)...).
- The Norman rulers kept their possessions in France, and even extended them to most of Western France (Brittany, Aquitaine...). French became the official language of England, and remained it until 1362, a bit after the beginning of the Hundred Years' War with France. English nevertheless remained the language of the populace, and the fusion of English (a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Norse languages) with French and Latin (used by the clergy) slowly evolved into modern English.

12th & 13th centuries : Royal intrigues & troubled successions

- The English royals after William I had the infamous habit to contend for the throne. William's son, William II was killed while hunting, and it is believed that he was in fact murdered, so that William's second son, Henry, could become king. Henry I's succession was also agitated, with his daughter Matilda and her cousin Stephen (grandson of William I) starting a civil war for the throne. Although Stephen won, Matilda's son succeeded him as Henry II (1133-1189). It is under Henry II that the University of [Oxford](#) was established.
- The following struggle of Henry II's two children was made famous by the legend of Robin Hood. Richard I "Lionheart" was hardly ever in England, too busy defending his French possessions or fighting the infidels in the Holy Land. During that time, his brother John "Lackland" usurped the throne and started another civil war.
- John's grandson, Edward I "Longshanks" (1239-1307) spent most of his 35-year reign fighting wars, first against his barons led by Simon de Montfort (see [Kenilworth](#)), then on the 9th Crusade, back home annexing Wales, and last but not least against the Scots, led by William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, whose proud resistance was immortalised in the Hollywood movie [Braveheart](#).
- Edward I's son, Edward II, was all his father wasn't. He didn't like war, preferring to party with his friends. He also happened to be gay, which led to his imprisonment and tragic murder by his wife and her lover (see [Gloucester](#)).

14th & 15th centuries : Hundred Years' War & War of the Roses

- **Edward III** (1312-1377) succeeded his father at the age of 15 and reigned for 50 years (the second longest reign in English history after Henry III, queens excluded). His reign was marked by the beginning of the **Hundred Years' War** (1337-1416) and epidemics of bubonic plague ("Black Death"), which killed one third of England (and Europe's) population.
- Edward III was often fighting in France, and the government was controlled *de facto* by his third son John of [Gaunt](#), Duke of [Lancaster](#). John of Gaunt's son, Henry Bolingbroke, took advantage of his cousin Richard II's absence to proclaim himself King **Henry IV** (1367-1413). Escaping several assassination attempts, Henry also had to deal with the revolt of Owen Glendower, who declared himself Prince of Wales in 1400, then with the rebellion of the Earl of Northumberland.
- **Henry V** (1387-1422), famously defeated the French at the **Battle of Agincourt** in 1415, but his pious and peace-loving son **Henry VI** (1421-1471), who inherited the throne at just one year old, was to have a much more troubled reign. The regent lost most of the English possessions in France to a 17-year old girl (Joan of Arc) and in 1455, the Wars of the Roses broke out. This civil war opposed the House of Lancaster (the Red Rose, supporters of Henry VI) to the House of York (the White Rose, supporters of Edward IV). The Yorks argued that the crown should have passed to Edward III's second son, Lionel of [Antwerp](#), rather than to the Lancasters descending from John of Gaunt.
- One of the key players was Richard Neville, Earl of [Warwick](#), nicknamed "the Kingmaker", for deposing Henry VI for Edward IV, then again Edward for Henry 9 years later.
- Edward IV's son, Edward V, only reigned for one year, before being locked in the Tower of [London](#) by his evil uncle, **Richard III** (1452-1485), although probably not as evil as Shakespeare depicted him in his play. The reason is that Lancastrian **Henry Tudor** (1457-1509), the half-brother of Henry VI, defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, and became Henry VII, founder of the House of Tudor, for which Shakespeare wrote.
- Henry Tudor's son is maybe England's most famous and historically important ruler, the magnificent Henry VIII (1491-1547).

The 16th century Renaissance

Henry VIII

- Henry VIII is remembered in history as one of the most powerful kings of England. Except for getting married six times, desperate for a male heir, Henry changed the face of England, passing the ***Acts of Union with Wales*** (1536-1543), thus becoming the first English King of Wales, then changing his title of Lord of Ireland into that of (also first) King of Ireland (1541).
- In 1533, Henry divorced his first wife, Catherine of Aragon (Queen Mary's mother, see [Peterborough](#)) to remarry Anne Boleyn (Queen Elizabeth I's mother), the Pope excommunicated Henry, and in return, Henry proclaimed himself head of the ***Church of England***. To assure the control over the clergy, Henry dissolved all the monasteries in the country (1536-1540) and nationalised them, becoming immensely rich in the process.
- Henry VIII was the last English king to claim the title of King of France, as he lost his last possession there, the port of Calais (although he tried to recover it, taking [Tournai](#) for a few years, the only town in present-day Belgium to have been under English rule).
- It was also under Henry VIII that England started exploring the globe and trading outside Europe, although this would only develop to colonial proportions under his daughters, Mary I and especially Elizabeth I (after whom Virginia was named).

Henry VIII's children

- The 10-year old Edward VI inherited the throne at his father's death in 1547, but died 6 years later and was succeeded by his elder half-daughter Mary. **Mary I** (1516-1558), a staunch Catholic, intended to restore Roman Catholicism to England, executing over 300 religious dissenters in her 5-year reign (which earned her the nickname of *Bloody Mary*). She married the powerful King Philip II of Spain, who also ruled over the Netherlands, the Spanish Americas and the Philippines (named after him), and was the champion of the Counter-Reform (read "Inquisition"). Mary died childless of ovarian cancer in 1558, and her half-sister Elizabeth ascended the throne.

- The great Virgin Queen **Elizabeth I** (1533-1603) saw the first golden age of England. It was an age of great navigators like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh (see [Plymouth](#)), an age of enlightenment with the philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616).
- Her reign was also marked by conflicts with France and Scotland (bound by a common queen, Mary Stuart), then Spain and Ireland. Elizabeth was an undecisive and prudent ruler. She never married, and when Mary Stuart tried and failed to take over the throne of England, Elizabeth kept her imprisoned for 19 years (most of the time in [Chatsworth House](#) under the guard of the Earl of [Shrewsbury](#)), before finally signing her act of execution.
- Elizabeth died in 1603, and ironically, Mary Stuart's son, James VI of Scotland, succeeded Elizabeth as King James I of England - thus creating the United Kingdom.

The 17th century : Religious troubles & Civil War

- **James I** (1566-1625) was a Protestant, like Elizabeth, and aimed at improving relations with the Catholics. But 2 years after he was crowned, a group of Catholic extremists led by Guy Fawkes attempted to place a bomb at the parliament's state opening, when the king and his entourage would be present, so as to get rid of all the Protestant aristocracy in one fell swoop. The conspirators were betrayed by one of their number just hours before the plan's enactment. The failure of the **Gunpowder Plot**, as it is known (see [Coughton Court](#)), is still celebrated throughout Britain on Guy Fawkes' night (5th November), with fireworks and bonfires burning effigies of the conspirators' leader.
- The divide between Catholics and Protestant worsened after this incident. James's successor **Charles I** (1600-1649) was eager to unify Britain and Ireland, and wanted to do so as an absolute ruler of divine right, like his French counter-part Louis XIV. Despite being an (Anglican) Protestant, his marriage with a French Roman Catholic combined with policies at odd with Calvinist ideals and his totalitarian handling of the Parliament eventually culminated in the **English Civil War** (1642-1651). The country was torn between Royalist and Parliamentarian troops, and most of the medieval castles still standing were destroyed during that period (eg. [Kenilworth](#), [Corfe](#), [Bodiam](#)...).
- Charles was beheaded, and the puritan leader of the Parliamentarians, **Oliver Cromwell** (1599-1658), ruled the country as a dictator from 1649 to his death. He was briefly succeeded by his son Richard at the head of the Protectorate, but his political inability prompted the Parliament to restore the monarchy in 1660, calling in Charles I' exiled son, **Charles II** (1630-1685).

The Restoration

- The "Merry Monarch", as Charles II was known, was better at handling Parliament than his father, although as ruthless with other matters. It is during his reign that the Whig and Tory parties were created, and that the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam became English and was renamed New York, after Charles' brother, James, Duke of [York](#) (and later James II).
- Charles II was the patron of the arts and sciences. He helped found the Royal Society and sponsored architect Sir Christopher Wren, who rebuilt the City of [London](#) of the Great Fire of 1666, and constructed some of England's greatest edifices. Charles acquired Bombay and Tangiers through his Portuguese wife, thus laying the foundation for the British Empire.
- Although Charles produced countless illegitimate children, 14 of whom he acknowledged (including the Duke of Monmouth, the Duke of Northumberland, the Duke of Grafton, the Duke of Cleveland, the Duke of Richmond and the Duke of St Albans), his wife couldn't bear an heir, and when he died in 1685 the throne passed to his Catholic and unpopular brother James.

The Glorious Revolution

- James II's religious inclinations and despotism led to his quick removal from power in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. His Protestant daughter Mary, married to his equally Protestant nephew, William of Orange. The couple was "invited" by the Protestant aristocracy to conduct an invasion from the Netherlands. They defeated James' troops at the Battle of the Boyne, and deposed James II with limited bloodshed. James was allowed to escape to France, where he remained the rest of his life under the protection of Louis XIV. His son and grandson later attempted to come back to the throne, but without success.
- The new ruling couple became known as the "Grand Alliance". The parliament ratified that all kings or queens would have to be Protestant from then on. After Mary's death in 1694, then William's in 1702, James's second daughter, Anne, ascended the throne. In 1707, the **Act of Union** joined the Scottish and the English Parliaments thus creating the single Kingdom of Great Britain and centralising political power in [London](#). Anne died heirless in 1714, and a distant German cousin, George of Hanover, was called to rule over the UK.

The House of Hanover

German Georges

- When **George I** (1660-1727) arrived in England, he couldn't speak a word of English, and the legend has it that he was mistakenly arrested while strolling around his palace's garden when questioned by his staff who weren't familiar with his appearance.
- The king's inability to communicate well with his government and subjects led him to appoint a *de facto* Prime Minister in the person of **Robert Walpole** (1676-1745). This marked a turning point in British politics, as future monarchs were also to remain more passive figures, letting the reins of the government to the Prime Minister.
- **George II** (1683-1760) was also German born, and combined the title of Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, Archtreasurer and Prince-Elector of the Holy Roman Empire to that of King of Great-Britain and Ireland. He was a powerful ruler, and the last British monarch to personally lead his troops into battle. Hanoverian composer G.F. Handel was commissioned to compose his coronation anthem ("Zadok the Priest"), which has been sung at every coronation since.
- The British Empire expanded considerably during his reign and the song "God Save the King" also developed during that period. Some other notable changes include the replacement of the Julian Calendar by the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, and the New Year was officially moved from 25 March to 1 January.

George III : American, French & Industrial Revolutions (1)

- The first Hanoverian king to be born in England with English as his native language, George III (1738-1820) had one of the most troubled and interesting reign in British history. He ascended the throne during the **Seven Years' War** (1756-1763) opposing almost all the major Western powers in two teams, chiefly British against French, and ended in a *de facto* victory for the UK, which acquired New France (Quebec), Florida, and most of French India in the process.
- However, 13 years later, the **American War of Independence** (1776-1782) started after the British government imposed a series of taxes on the colonies. The 13 American colonies were finally granted their independence in 1782 and formed the United States of America. 7 years later, the French Revolution broke out, and Louis XVI was guillotined. George III suffered from an hereditary disease known as porphyria, and his mental health seriously deteriorated from 1788. By 1811 he was permanently insane (see Regency below). In 1800, the **Act of Union** merged the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland.

George III : American, French & Industrial Revolutions (2)

- During that time, Britain had to face the ambitions of Napoleon to conquer the whole of Europe. Admiral Nelson's naval victory at Trafalgar (off the coast of Spain) in 1805, and Wellington's decisive victory at [Waterloo](#) saved the UK, and further reinforced its international position. The 19th century would be dominated by the British Empire, spreading on all five continents, from Canada and the Caribbeans to Australia and New Zealand, via Africa, India and South-East Asia.
- Another notable fact of George III's reign was the start of the **Industrial Revolution**, with James Watt's famous steam engine and the mechanisation of the manufacturing industry transforming the face of England to this day. Great industrial cities such as [Birmingham](#), [Manchester](#), [Liverpool](#), [Leeds](#) and [Sheffield](#) emerged as the new economic centres of the country, their population booming several fold. The gap between the rich and the poor increased considerably, as was poignantly described by Charles Dickens in such novels as [David Copperfield](#) or [Oliver Twist](#).

Regency & Reforms (1)

- During George III's insanity (1811-1820), the Prince of Wales was appointed as Regent, then became King **George IV** (1762-1830) at his father's death. The Regent was known for his extravagance and liking for women. He was more often diverting himself in his magnificent Oriental-style pavilion in [Brighton](#) than worrying about the affairs of state in [London](#), leaving the power to the Prime Minister, **Lord Liverpool** (1770-1828), during most of his reign.
- George IV notoriously had poor relationships with his father, and especially his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, refusing to recognise her as Queen and seeking to divorce her.

Regency & Reforms (2)

- The King and Lord Liverpool were opposed to the Catholic Emancipation, i.e. the issue of reducing restrictions on the political rights of Roman Catholics. The Duke of Wellington, however, passed the Catholic Relief Act in 1829 during his term as Prime Minister (1828-1830).
- George IV died in 1830, and was replaced by his brother, **William IV** (1765-1837). In 1831, the Whig party came back to power and **Earl Grey** (1764-1845), the new Prime Minister (after whom the tea is named), reformed the electoral system.
- On the cultural scene, the early 19th century was highly prolific. It was the Romantic period, with poets like Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) or John Keats (1795-1821) and novelist Jane Austen (1775-1817). Also worth noting is that the world's first steam train was launched on the Stockton and Darlington railway (North-East England) in 1825 by George Stephenson (1781-1848).

The British Empire & Victorian England (1)

- In 1837, William IV died of liver disease and the throne passed to the next in line, his 18-year old niece **Victoria** (1819-1901), although she did not inherit the Kingdom of Hanover, where the Salic Law forbid women to rule.
- Victoria didn't expect to become queen, was still unmarried and inexperienced in politics, and had to rely on her Prime Minister, **Lord Melbourne** (1779-1848), after whom the Australian city is named. She finally got married to her first cousin, **Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha** (1819-1861), and both were respectively niece and nephew of the first King of the Belgians, Leopold I (of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha).
- Prince Albert organised the **Great Exhibition** (the first World Fair) in 1851, and the profits were used to found the great South Kensington Museum (later renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum) in [London](#).
- Britain asserted its hegemony on virtually every part of the globe, although this resulted in numerous wars, as for example the **Opium Wars** (1839-42 & 1856-60) with Qing China, or the **Boer Wars** (1880-81 & 1899-1902) with the Dutch-speaking settlers of South Africa.

The British Empire & Victorian England (2)

- In 1854, the the United Kingdom was brought into the *Crimean War* (1854-56) on the side of the Ottoman Empire and against Russia. One of the best known figure of that war was Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), who fought for the improvement of the women's condition and pioneered modern nursing (see [Claydon House](#)).
- In 1861, Albert died prematurely at the age of 42. Victoria was devastated and retired in a semi-permanent state of mourning. She nevertheless started a romantic relationship with her Scottish servant **John Brown** (1826-1883), and there were even talks of a secret marriage. This episode of Victoria's life has been the object of the film [Mrs Brown](#).
- The latter years of her reign were dominated by two influential Prime Ministers, **Benjamin Disraeli** (1808-1881) and his rival **William Ewart Gladstone** (1809-1898). The former was the favourite of the Queen, and crowned her "Empress of India" in 1876, in return of which Victoria creating him Earl of Beaconsfield. Gladstone was a liberal, and often at odd with both Victoria and Disraeli, but the strong support he enjoyed from within his party kept him in power for a total of 14 years between 1868 and 1894. He legalised trade unions, advocated both universal education and universal suffrage (well, at least for men).
- Queen Victoria was to have the longest reign of any British monarch (64 years), but also the most glorious, as she ruled over 40% of the globe and a quarter of the world's population.

The Two World Wars (1)

- Victoria's numerous children married in about all European Royal families, which earned her the affectionate title of "grandmother of Europe". Her son, **Edward VII** (1841-1910) was the uncle of German Emperor Wilhelm II, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, King Alfonso XIII of Spain, and Carl Eduard, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, while George I of the Hellenes and King Frederick VIII of Denmark were his brothers-in-law; and King Albert I of Belgium, Manuel II of Portugal, King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, and Prince Ernst August, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, were his cousins.
- The alliances between these related monarchs escalated in the **Great War** (WWI) of 1914-1918 when Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in Sarajevo, and Austria declared war on Serbia, which in turn was allied to France, Russia and the UK. The First World War left over 9 million dead (including nearly 1 million Britons) throughout Europe, and financially ruined most of the countries involved. The monarchies in Germany, Austria, Russia and the Ottoman Empire all fell, and the map of central and eastern Europe was redesigned.

The Two World Wars (2)

- The consequences in Britain were disillusionment with the government and monarchy, and the creation of the Labour Party. The General Strike of 1926 and the worsening economy led to radical political changes, and women were granted the same universal suffrage as men (from age 21 instead of previously 30) in 1928.
- In 1936, **Edward VIII** (1894-1972) succeeded to his father George V, but abdicated the same year to marry Wallis Simpson, a twice divorced American woman. His brother then unexpectedly became **George VI** (1895-1952) after the scandal.
- Nazi Germany was becoming more menacing as Hitler grew more powerful and aggressive. Finally Britain and France were forced to declare war on Germany after the invasion of Poland in September 1939, and so started the **Second World War**. The charismatic **Winston Churchill** (1874-1965) became the war-time Prime Minister in 1940 and his speeches encouraged the British to fight off the attempted German invasion. In one of his most patriotic speeches before the Battle of Britain (1940), Churchill address the British people with "*We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.*" And indeed, Britain did not surrender.

The Postwar (1)

- In 1945, the UK was bankrupt and its industry destroyed by the Blitz war, and the British Empire was dismantled little by little, first granting the independence to India and Pakistan in 1947, then to the other Asian, African and Caribbean colonies in the 1950's and 60's (in the 70's and 80's for the smaller islands of the eastern Caribbean).
- Most of these ex-colonies formed the British Commonwealth, now known as the Commonwealth of Nations. 53 states are now members of the Commonwealth, accounting for 1.8 billion people (about 30% of the global population) and about 25% of the world's land area.
- In 1952, **Elizabeth II** (b. 1926) ascended the throne at the age of 26. Although she somewhat rehabilitated the image of the monarchy, her children did not, and their sentimental lives have made the headlines of the tabloid newspapers at least since the marriage of Charles, Prince of Wales, with Lady Diana Spencer (see [Althorp](#)) in 1981.
- Pop and Rock music replaced colonial remembrances in the 1960's with bands like the Beatles, Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones or Black Sabbath. The Hippie subculture also developed at that time.

The Postwar (2)

- The 70's brought the oil crisis and the collapse of the British industry. Conservative PM **Margaret Thatcher** (b. 1925) was elected in 1979 and stayed until 1990. She privatised the railways and shut down inefficient factories, but also increased the gap between the rich and the poor by cutting on the social security. Her methods were so harsh that she was nicknamed the 'Iron Lady'.
- Thatcher was succeeded in her party by the unpopular John Major, but in 1997, the "New Labour" (more to the right than the "Old Labour") came back to power with **Tony Blair** (b. 1953). Blair's liberal policies and unwavering support of neo-conservative US President George W. Bush (especially regarding the invasion of Iraq in 2003) disappointed many Leftists, who really saw in Blair but a Rightist in disguise. But Blair has also positively surprised many by his intelligence and remarkable skills as an orator and negotiator.
- Nowadays, the English economy relies heavily on services. The main industries are travel (discount airlines and travel agencies), education (apart from [Oxford](#) and [Cambridge](#) universities and textbooks, hundreds of language schools for learners of English), music (EMI, HMV, Virgin...), prestige cars (Rolls Royce, Bentley, Jaguar, Lotus, Aston Martin, MG...), fashion (Burberry, Dunhill, Paul Smith, Vivienne Westwood, French Connection...), and surprisingly to some, food (well especially tea, biscuits, chocolates and jam or companies like Unilever and Cadbury-Schweppes).