

2

James I and Charles I: character, court and favourites

EXTRACT 1

In the political and constitutional history of Britain, 1603 marks a much less crucial turning point than 1625. The reasons for this lie in the personality and political style of the kings. Seldom has the contrast between two monarchs been sharper than that between James I and Charles I. In place of an outgoing, affectionate and talkative king came one who was painfully shy, aloof, quiet and cold. Where his father had been wild and untidy but politically skilful, Charles was grim and chaste – a man of impeccable private morals but far too brittle, inflexible and authoritarian to be a successful ruler. A deeply reserved man, he was much less accessible to his subjects than James had been, and preferred to withdraw from the rough and tumble of political life into a private world surrounded by his family, art collections and court masques. In a personal monarchy, the character of an individual ruler was bound to have profound political implications, and Charles soon showed himself poorly suited to governing the three kingdoms he had inherited.

Adapted from *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1603–1707*
by David L. Smith (Blackwell 1998)

ACTIVITY

Summarise Smith's views in Extract 1 in two sentences.

KEY QUESTION

As you read this chapter, consider the following Key Questions:

- How far did the monarchy change?
- How important was the role of key individuals and groups and how were they affected by developments?
- How important were ideas and ideology?

The Characters of James I and Charles I

When James became king of England in 1603, he was already an experienced monarch. He had been James VI of Scotland since 1567 (at the age of 13 months), and had effectively been the ruler of that country since he was 17. James was an intellectual, outgoing man who enjoyed debate and dealing with people. Alongside his ability to communicate and engage with people, James was also pragmatic, and these two qualities enabled him for the most part to make the ill-defined English political system work.

EXTRACT 2

James' sound judgement and political skill proved well suited to preserve the delicate balances in Church and State that he had inherited from Elizabeth. Precisely because he could live with untidiness, and did not try to tie up loose ends or define blurred edges, he evolved an effective style of government which appealed to a broadly agreed ideological framework and promoted political and religious stability. His free and easy manner made for good

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- the characters of James I and Charles I
- how James' and Charles' characters and views on monarchy shaped their monarchies and styles of rule
- the courts of James I and Charles I
- Buckingham as a favourite of both James I and Charles I.

KEY CHRONOLOGY

1603	James Stuart, King James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England on the death of the childless Elizabeth I
1604–11	James I's First Parliament
1605	Gunpowder Plot
1606	James' failed attempt at Union with Scotland
1610	The Great Contract
1614	The Addled Parliament
1615	The emergence of Buckingham as James' favourite
1618	The outbreak of the Thirty Years War
1621	James' Third Parliament
1624	James' Fourth Parliament
1625	Prince Charles is married to the French princess, Henrietta-Maria
1625	Charles I becomes king
1628	Assassination of Buckingham

CROSS-REFERENCE

See page 1 of Chapter 1 for the definition of personal monarchy.

ACTIVITY

How does Smith, in Extract 2, suggest that James I was a successful ruler?

personal relations with his leading subjects and allowed the 'points of contact' between ruler and ruled to operate efficiently. The occasional moments of tactlessness, especially in his speeches to Parliament, stood out all the more because James' approach was generally conciliatory. Apart from his dangerous dependence upon Buckingham, he remained a shrewd judge of character until the end of his life. Some of his subjects viewed him with distaste or yearned for more systematic reforms, but very few of them actually disliked him.

A History of the Modern British Isles, 1603–1707 by David L. Smith (Blackwell, 1998)

KEY TERM

points of contact: Communication between the Political Nation and the monarch was crucial to the functioning of the English political system. The main points of contact were the Court and Parliament

Historians stress that Charles I was a very different man and king from his politically astute father. Kevin Sharpe, for example, has commented that he 'was in many respects a complete contrast to his father', and Thomas Cogswell referred to Charles as being James' 'mirror opposite'. Michael B. Young has gone so far as to argue that 'it was not just that Charles happened to be the opposite of his father; he consciously set out to make himself the opposite.'

Charles I's differences were rooted in his personality. In contrast with his outgoing father, Charles was shy and hampered by a speech defect. Both traits led to his being unapproachable and, more damaging, uncommunicative with Parliament. In governing, his intentions and actions often went unexplained, leaving others to interpret them. Charles had an inferiority complex that made him overstress his prerogative. Because of his insecurity, he had none of James I's political shrewdness or flexibility. He was unwilling to compromise. Charles seemed unable to understand viewpoints that differed from his own and interpreted the slightest hint of criticism as rebellion. He tended to see conspiracies whether they existed or not.

ACTIVITY

Thinking Points

What possible negative consequences does Extract 3 suggest Charles' personality could have had on the functioning of a political system that was based on personal monarchy?

EXTRACT 3

Charles was a cold, formal figure who rarely sought to explain himself or to win affection. Instead, he emphasised the majesty of the Crown and required unquestioning obedience. He often failed to understand viewpoints different from his own and instead equated them with disloyalty. Possessing none of his father's willingness to compromise and conciliate, he proceeded even when a policy was arousing great opposition or was proving unworkable.

The British Wars, 1637–1651 by Peter Gaunt (Routledge, 1997)

CROSS-REFERENCE

Refer to Chapter 1, page 3 for an explanation of royal prerogative.

To read about James' speech to parliament of March 1610, in which he talks about the Divine Right of Kings, turn to Chapter 5, page 38.

Their views on monarchy

The differing personalities of the monarchs reflected how the monarchs viewed kingship. Both were firm believers in the Divine Right of Kings and defensive of their prerogative. Yet when it came to dealing with the ambiguity of the balance between the royal prerogative and parliamentary privilege in the unwritten constitution, James was pragmatic while Charles was provocative.

Although James had written about the art and theory of kingship (most notably in the book *Basilikon Doron* in 1599), he was able to distinguish between the theory and the practicalities of ruling. James saw himself as the 'peacemaker king' in his foreign policy and he also sought compromise and negotiation with the Political Nation in England while defending his prerogative.

Charles also sought to defend his prerogative, but did so provocatively, partly as a result of his limited self-confidence. He was unwilling to negotiate and the nature of his court increasingly hampered dialogue with the Political Nation, ultimately leading to the undermining of his authority.

KEY QUESTION

How important were ideas and ideology?

How James I's and Charles I's characters shaped their monarchies and styles of rule

In the personal monarchy of the Stuart Age, the royal court was the centre of power and the physical manifestation of the character and kingship of the monarch. It was not tied to a specific place: it was wherever the monarch was. The court was divided into the public outer chambers and the inner lodgings (or bedchamber), where the monarch enjoyed some privacy and to which access was strictly controlled. The Privy Council was the monarch's official body of advisers and administrators. It held considerable power, but the monarch did not have to follow its advice. Men with more personal contact with the monarch were sometimes more influential. The Bedchamber was the monarch's private apartments and was the centre of the court. The Gentlemen of the Bedchamber were those courtiers appointed to wait upon the monarch in these rooms. As such they had greater access to the monarch and, therefore, potentially more influence over him.

ACTIVITY

Create a diagram to illustrate the royal court. Add annotations to your diagram.

Major issues were debated at court, which was often divided into **factions** or groups. The existence of factions was closely linked to the workings of the **patronage** system that shaped political success.

The court of James I

James I's court exhibited the different aspects of his personality. The court was an open and lively place that reflected the king's enjoyment of life. He was noted for his open, physical interaction with his courtiers. At its extreme, the court was, and has been, criticised as drunken, immoral and debauched. Yet James' intellectual interests were also emphasised at his court, particularly in his patronage of Shakespeare.

One source of tension at James' court was the early dominance of the Bedchamber by Scots. Although the English elite held the major state offices, they were concerned about the influence the Scots could wield through their access to James. The first Englishman that James appointed to the Bedchamber was George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, in 1615, and this created a new source of tension.

The court of Charles I

Charles I regarded his court as a microcosm, or miniature version, of his state – a model for what could be achieved in the country.

EXTRACT 4

Charles's persistent effort to impose order on his own court reveals much about his mentality. He wanted to get things under control, arrange them his way. Charles subjected himself to rigid self-control. However, Charles was not just a controlled personality; he was a controlling personality. He endeavoured to impose his will on others as he had on himself, to control the external world as rigidly as he controlled his inner world.

Charles I by Michael B. Young (Macmillan, 1997)

KEY TERMS

Privy Council: the king's selected advisers who met in private to shape the monarch's wishes into policy and oversee their implementation

Bedchamber: the monarch's private living space; the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber were courtiers who waited upon the monarch in these rooms; their duties included providing companionship to the monarch; in the Stuart Age, members of the Bedchamber were important figures at court, and their access to the king meant they could enjoy great political influence

faction: competing groups in politics; in this case, dissenting groups based on personal or family relationships that sought the favour of the monarch

patronage: political success was based on establishing a network of support. Those furthest up the system could act as patrons to support 'clients' lower down the system. Through this support, the clients could gain advancement, and the patron could both show off his power and use his clients to carry out tasks appropriate to their place and connections. The political aim of all was to build and use a network of connections to move as close to the king as possible

Catholicism: the faith of the Christian Church headed by the Pope; in the eyes of many English at the time, Catholicism was linked with absolutism, and the threat of both was symbolised by the power of Spain and France

CROSS-REFERENCE

See the Key Profile in Chapter 2, page 15 for more information about the Duke of Buckingham.

To read more about the tension created by Buckingham, see Chapter 6, pages 53–54.

CROSS-REFERENCE

See Chapters 4 and 7 for a detailed considerations of religious differences in this period, including Catholicism, Puritanism and the development of Arminianism.



Fig. 1 Henrietta Maria

KEY TERM

court masque: a type of dramatic entertainment popular among the English nobility during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that included dancing and acting by masked players; the main performers were normally professionals, but amateurs, including Charles I and his courtiers, sometimes took on silent roles

The strict order that Charles imposed on his court, and the fact that it included only his supporters, made it seem isolated from the rest of the country, offering those outside it no point of contact in the political process. The court also seemed to be dominated by Catholics and Arminians. This caused even greater political damage because Catholicism at this time was strongly linked with absolutism, as seen in Spain and France, and the Political Nation was uneasy about having a monarch who could rule freely without regard for their concerns.

Charles I: Patron of the arts

One of the main forms of entertainment in Charles I's court was the court masque, an elaborately costumed fantasy play that included dancing. Both Charles and his Catholic wife Henrietta Maria took parts in the court masques.



Fig. 2 Title page to a vindication of the Divine Right of King Charles I, 1640

The usual theme of the court masques was of disorder in the land which, at the appearance of the king and queen, was transformed into order. In general the masque at Charles' court was a reflection of the role the king felt he was fulfilling in bringing order to the country. As the art historian Roy C. Strong has argued, Charles 'made every Stuart court masque a vehicle for an exposition of the political theory of the Divine Right of Kings'.

There was some direct opposition to the imagery of the court masques. William Prynne produced the pamphlet *Histrio-mastix* (*Actor's Tragedy*) in 1633. As a Puritan, Prynne viewed women performing in plays as sinful, and the index entry in *Histrio-mastix* of 'women actors, notorious whores' was seen as an attack on the queen's role in the masques. In addition, Puritans frowned upon ceremonies of any sort, including masques, because they associated them with Catholicism.

Alongside the masques, Charles' extensive art collection, which he had assembled at enormous cost, and the production of images of the king by the artist Anthony Van Dyck created the impression to outsiders that Charles I aimed to be an absolutist Catholic monarch.

EXTRACT 5

Because of his closeness to Van Dyck, and his highly developed knowledge of painting, it can be assumed that Charles I exercised more control than most patrons over the images that finally emerged. Perhaps more than any of the texts produced in the 1630s, they capture the essence of how he liked to imagine himself and wanted others to imagine him.

Charles I by Richard Cust (Longman, 2005)

AS LEVEL PRACTICE QUESTION

The courts of James I and Charles I were only important for the entertainments and social activities that took place there. Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

A CLOSER LOOK**Van Dyck's Presentation of Charles I**

Fig. 3 *Charles I on horseback*, by Anthony Van Dyck

STUDY TIP

When faced with this type of question, remember that you should focus on the question requirements and not just describe what happened at court. You need to look back at the function of the court during both reigns. Make a list of ways in which it provided for entertainments and social activities and a list of other functions. Decide whether the former was its only important role or whether you feel its other functions were equally or even more important. Decide what you will argue and present a balanced case with an apt conclusion.

KEY TERM

Puritanism: a radical form of Protestantism; Puritans saw themselves as the 'godly' ones: they sought a further reformation of the Church of England to remove the remnants of Catholicism that remained after the Reformation

CROSS-REFERENCE

For more on Henrietta Maria and how Charles I came to marry her, see the Key Profile on page 34 in Chapter 4.

ACTIVITY

Research some other portraits of Charles I and write a few sentences on how he wanted to be portrayed.

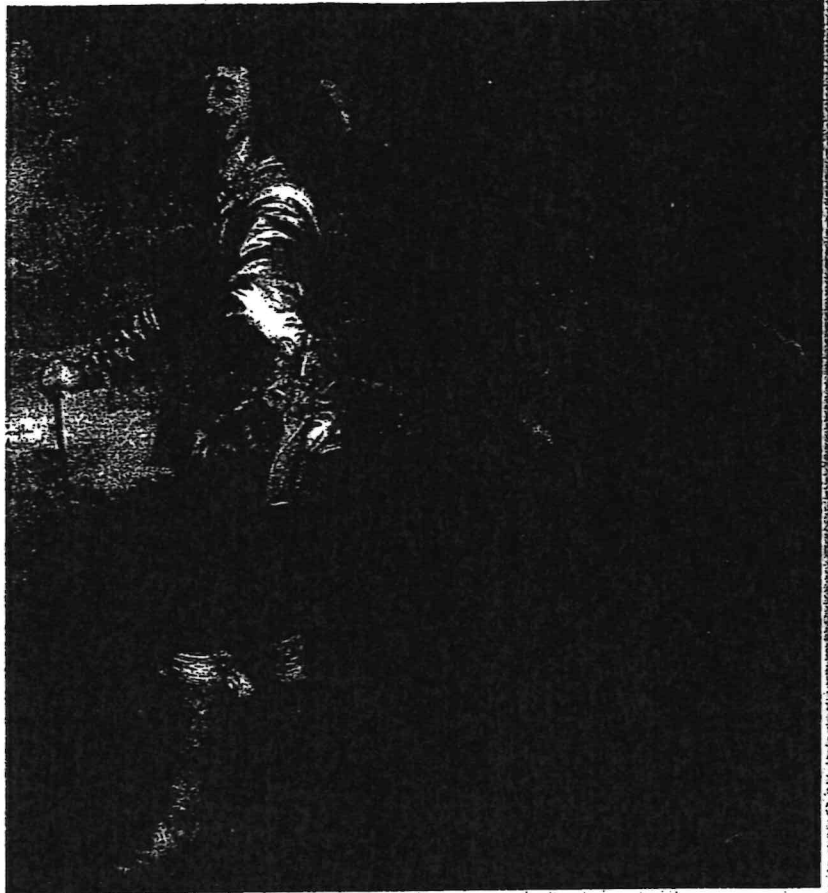


Fig. 4 *Charles I at the Hunt (or Le Roi à la chasse)*, painted by Anthony Van Dyck in around 1635

ACTIVITY

Study the pictures

1. What image of himself is Charles trying to present in Figs. 3 and 4? Consider the following:
 - Charles' stance
 - Charles' clothes
 - Charles' gaze
 - objects in the picture
 - the background.
2. What are the uses and limitations of portraits as sources for an historian?

ACTIVITY

Construct a chart to show the differences and similarities between the courts, personalities and interests of James I and Charles I.

KEY TERM

favourite: a courtier who became especially close to the monarch and thereby gained enormous political influence; access to the monarch at court meant power

The favourites of James I and Charles I

James I became increasingly close to a range of male courtiers during his reigns in Scotland and England. Any courtier who became particularly close to a monarch was seen as a favourite.

James I's open affection for a range of male courtiers was a source of tension at his court. Three men were among his most notable favourites:

Favourite of James I	Period of influence (1592–1625)
Esme Stuart, Duke of Lennox	1579–81
Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset	1607–13
George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham	1615–25

Favourites under James I provoked concern about their influence because, as men, they were in a position to have an open political role, and the monarch allowed them to have one. Their favour was also seen as another example of the king's debauched lifestyle and immoral court.

The key favourite of both James and Charles was the Duke of Buckingham. Such was his prominence at court that he was also a major source of political tension in the years 1618 to 1628.

The relationship between James and Buckingham was based on personal affection. Through his remarkable skill, Buckingham was able to maintain his position as favourite when Charles became king in 1625. Charles and Buckingham had initially suffered a difficult relationship during James' reign, but starting in 1620, James took a role in reconciling the two, and it was certainly in Buckingham's interest to develop his links with the new heir to the throne. Charles' and Buckingham's relationship was less overtly sexual than the one Buckingham had enjoyed with James, but his favouritism under Charles still caused problems. Buckingham was allowed a dominant role in the management of royal patronage, which forced others to look to Parliament in order to pursue their interests. Buckingham's pre-eminence also led to conflict within the court, disrupting the parliaments of 1621 to 1628.

KEY QUESTION

How important was the role of key individuals and groups and how were they affected by developments?

KEY PROFILE

George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1592–1628)

Buckingham came to prominence in 1616 because James I liked him. From 1620 he became closer to James' son, the then Prince Charles. In 1623, the prince and Buckingham travelled together to Madrid in an attempt to secure a marriage between Charles and the Spanish princess, Maria. This experience seems to have bound them closer, and when James died in 1625, Buckingham became one of the new king Charles I's favourites. As Lord High Admiral, Buckingham showed himself to be an effective administrator, but he was also seen as responsible for foreign policy failures. Buckingham was defended by Charles I when he was attacked by Parliament, but in 1628 Buckingham was assassinated by a disgruntled soldier.



Fig. 5 George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham (1592–1628)

CROSS-REFERENCE

See Chapters 5 and 6 for more on the political tensions created by Buckingham, as well as his involvement in foreign policies.

Summary

In a time of personal monarchy, a monarch's personality was clearly going to be the most important factor in shaping the period in which they ruled. The differences in the way Charles and James' courts functioned was a reflection of their different personalities. While in the period 1618–29 both James and Charles had to deal with the same interrelated issues of foreign policy, finance, religion and parliament, their differing responses were rooted in their personalities and their differing interaction with the Political Nation. What they shared, more than anything else, was a reliance on Buckingham, but this itself was another source of tension.

STUDY TIP

To answer this question you should refresh your memory on how government operated by looking back to Chapter 1 and re-reading this chapter, too. Decide whether you think a monarch's personality affected government at this time and if so, which aspects of government. Make your view clear in your introduction – referring specifically to the first two Stuart monarchs – and argue a case that shows the ways in which personality made a difference and the ways in which it did not.

A LEVEL

PRACTICE QUESTION

'The personalities of Charles I and James I made little difference to the way government operated in the early seventeenth century.' Assess the validity of this view.