

## Chapter Twelve

# THE GOTHIC AGE

**H**ENRY III was nine when he came to the throne. He was to rule England for fifty-six years and effectively for most of the thirteenth century. This was an age of enormous change and growing prosperity for the country, caught in a new architectural style imported and adapted from Northern France, the Gothic. All over England churches and cathedrals were rebuilt in the new manner reflecting the confidence and wealth of a society secure in its Christian faith and in the order of things, not only in this life but in the one to come. Clusters of small columns soared heavenwards forming pointed arches and windows inset with stone tracery and filled with stained glass, culminating in elaborately ribbed vaults. This was medieval England at its apogee, as one province of a Christendom held together by a common faith, with its focus in Rome and its head the pope, the successor of St. Peter. The clergy moved across what was to them a Europe without boundaries speaking and writing a *lingua franca*, Latin. The noble classes too had most things in common, bound together by their acceptance of the conventions of feudalism and by the etiquette of chivalry. The loss of most of the Angevin Empire did not mean that England became insular. The English kings saw themselves as players on the international stage and the aristocracy shared the language and lifestyle of their peers across the Channel.

Against this backcloth of a united Christendom with shared ideals the events acted out in each area of Europe assume a different perspective. In England it revolved around the consequences of the Great Charter inherited from the king's father's reign. In Henry's case this was to become acute, for his idea of kingship was extremely elevated and from that sprang the periodic clash of king and barons, for the barons naturally desired to control or curtail the king's powers, constantly invoking the Great Charter in their support.

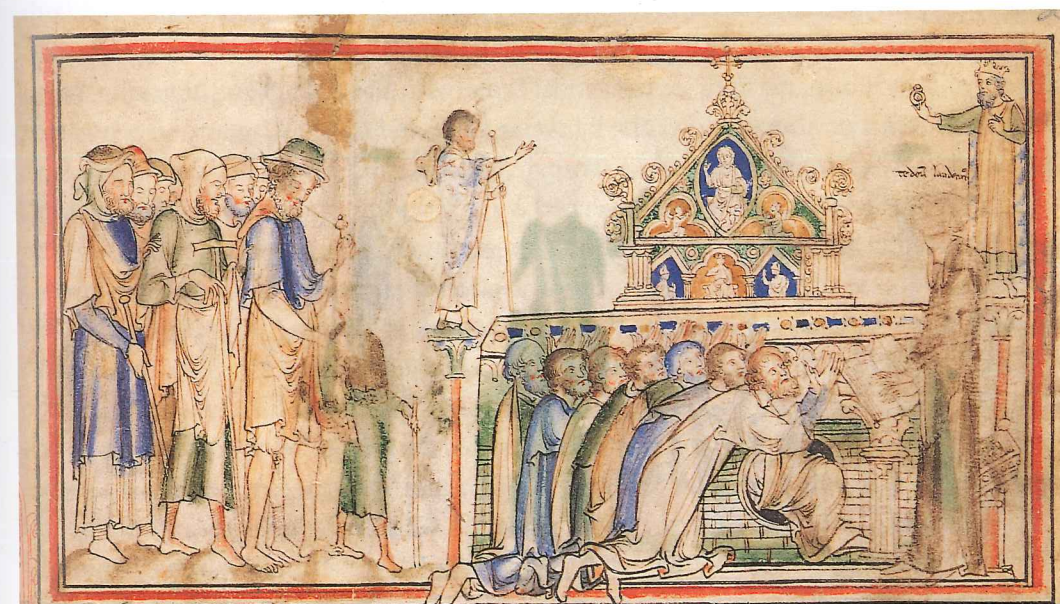
Henry III lacked the most important attribute essential for any medieval king: he was not a soldier. As a consequence he failed to do the two things which the barons most looked for: lead them into battle and shine in the tiltyard. Instead he expressed his kingship through art and pageantry, in both of which fields he was a master.

Extravagant, petulant, suspicious, obstinate and sharp-tongued, he had only one aim, to ensure that he was absolute monarch.

Henry's aspirations for the monarchy were summed up in one building, Westminster Abbey. In 1245 he took the decision to rebuild the old Anglo-Saxon abbey replacing it with a magnificent building in the French Gothic style which he had seen in Paris. The new abbey was to provide a setting for priest-like kings who were vicars of God on earth and lords of all men, lay and clerical. Their sanctity was emphasised by the royal saint, Edward the Confessor, who was given a splendid new shrine behind the high altar around which there was to be a royal burial place for the kings of England. The regalia was kept in the new church which was also the setting for the ritual of coronation in which each king, through being anointed, became set apart and above ordinary men. It was even believed that the king could heal by touch those suffering from a disease called scrofula.

Such grandeur reflected exactly how Henry III viewed his position and, although his father had lost most of the Angevin inheritance, this did not lessen the son's desire to compensate for it in other ways. The fact that both attempts to re-establish the Plantagenets as rulers on the mainland again ended in disaster should

The shrine of St. Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey. The illumination shows pilgrims waiting their turn to creep into one of the apertures in the base to make their petition. A custodian stands to the right reading out the saint's miracles. The richly decorated casket above, called the feretory, contained the bones. On the pillar to the right a statue of the king looks towards a vision he saw of St. John the Baptist.





not obscure the king's ambition. In 1254 he accepted the crown of Sicily for his younger son, Edmund, but that failed. Three years later his brother, Richard of Cornwall, was elected king of Germany. That too was doomed. As a result Henry, in 1259, was finally forced formally to renounce his rights to Normandy, Anjou and Poitou to Louis IX of France.

The barons were always against these expensive entanglements and the mountain of debt they incurred eventually ensured that their view of the king's position, as being one with some constraints, gained increasing support. For the first thirty years of his reign, however, Henry was able to rule more or less as he liked. The unease developing in the mind of the barons was partly due to the king's arrogance but partly also due to something else, government was becoming increasingly complicated. A century before, the chancery and the exchequer were merely parts of the royal household dealing with administrative and financial affairs. By the middle of the thirteenth century they had moved out and become separate departments, each with its own highly organised officials and records. The barons were suspicious and began to want a voice in the choice of the chancellor and the treasurer and even, on occasions, of the royal justiciar. Their means of achieving such control was through meetings of the Great Council which included all the lay and clerical leaders of the nation, but whose composition was by no means fixed. The king, however, made use instead of his own Royal Council consisting of men of his own choosing. The barons objected to this. Henry would have survived these challenges to his rule if his choices had been wiser and his government more effective. As it was, both tended to be ineffective and muddled.

The barons found a leader in the king's brother-in-law Simon de Montfort, a man of energy and vision, and their opportunity came with the collapse of the king's foreign adventures. For almost ten years, between 1257 and 1265, king and barons were locked into a succession of crises in a struggle for control. At first the king was forced to submit to the kingdom being governed by a Council of Fifteen of the barons' choosing headed by Simon de Montfort. Thereafter followed reversal and counter reversal as first one side and then the other was able to impose its will on government. The eventual result was civil war. At the Battle of Lewes the king was defeated and, a year later in 1265, at the Battle of Evesham, Simon de Montfort was not only defeated but killed.

Henry III had seemingly won but that was not altogether true, for during these crisis years recourse had been made again and again to meetings of the Great Council. To these now came, in addition, knights to represent the shires and, on one occasion, burgesses to represent the towns. Never before had meetings been held including so many different classes of those who made up the realm of England. The

meetings were called 'parliaments' from the French word *parler*, to speak, because they were conferences or parleys between the king and his subjects about affairs of state. Gradually the idea that the king should consult the magnates and representatives of the kingdom on certain subjects like taxation gained currency as something to be expected. No one in 1272, when Henry III died, could have foreseen that these sporadic parleys would lead to our modern Parliament.

What they did reflect was a very different society from that which had existed immediately after the Norman Conquest. In spite of the periodic outbursts of fighting between king and barons, England was remarkably stable. Medieval warfare in any case was rarely more than a localised and seasonal event affecting only a small area of the country. As the king pursued a policy of peace with France, expensive wars with their high taxation were avoided. Peace meant prosperity, so that both trade and agriculture could flourish without dislocation. This was the age when the wool trade began to develop on a large scale as international big business. Its organisation changed as English merchants learnt how to export wool across Europe. Initially this had been handled by Italians living in England who had come to collect the taxes due to the pope, but increasingly English merchants began to take over from them, particularly in the case of the huge export trade with Flanders where the wool was woven into fine cloth. It was woven in England too, which meant increasing numbers of weavers, fullers and dyers. Skilled tradespeople were more and more in evidence as not only the wool trade grew but so did other industries based on lead, tin, coal, iron and salt. Everywhere towns were burgeoning: ports like Bristol which prospered on the wine trade from Gascony, Lynn with its short crossing to Flanders, or Newcastle which exported to Scandinavia. Above all London, not only because it was next to the seat of the court and government at Westminster, but because it was the focal point of the country's road system and, as a consequence, was the major port for all transactions with the continent.

In the long term these entrepreneurs were to be the future but they sit uneasily within medieval society which was seen as consisting of only three groups: men of prayer, made up of those who had taken religious vows, men of war, embracing the feudal nobility and knights, and, finally, the men of toil or the peasants: in Latin: the *oratores*, *bellatores* and *laboratores*. The *oratores* belonged to the international fraternity of the Church of Rome with its hierarchy stretching across Europe bound in obedience to the pope and subject to canon law. In England the church was headed by its two archbishops of Canterbury and York, each with a network of dioceses below them, three in the north and eighteen in the south. Some, like Durham and Winchester, were amongst the richest in Christendom. Others, such as Bangor or Exeter,



were poor. The church had won its freedom and even had the last say in the choice of the clergy who worked in some nine thousand five hundred parishes. These owed their living to the tithe, a tenth part of the produce of the land of each parishioner. Then there were the monasteries: the old Benedictine foundations going back before the Conquest, those which had been founded in the previous century including about two hundred and fifty Augustinian houses and some hundred Cistercian. The wealth of all these varied according to their endowment but collectively the church offered a rich source of patronage not only at the disposal of the bishops but of the king and nobles. But the thirteenth century was the age of two new orders, that of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, the grey and the black friars. Unlike the earlier orders the members of these were out and about, especially in the towns, preaching, teaching and hearing confessions. They produced men of great learning who added to the lustre of the new universities at Oxford and Cambridge.

This was the great age of church building, especially of cathedrals, a movement which began in 1174 with Canterbury Cathedral and reached its climax with Salisbury. In 1220 the old Salisbury Cathedral was abandoned and the one we see today arose during the following fifty years. Churches, whether great or small, were the grandest of all medieval buildings for a very simple reason: every day the Eucharist, the liturgy of the mass, in which bread and wine became the body and blood of the Son of God, was acted out in them. They were built therefore to house God and, in addition, the bones and relics of holy people, God's saints. All these cathedral rebuildings included re-siting a saint's shrine behind the high altar. Such shrines were venerated and visited by people who came on pilgrimage. Sometimes the saint would intercede and heal the sick or avert a catastrophe. Each cathedral belonged to its saint or martyr.

The belief in the supernatural, in miracles, strange coincidences and of constant visible evidence of the invisible, was universal. People moved out of their wood, wattle and mud houses and, on entering the church, crossed into a world which mirrored exactly to them the Heavenly Jerusalem to come in the next life. Light, the symbol of the divine, poured in through windows peopled with the figures of saints. Everywhere, both inside and out, was covered with paintings and sculpture of the inhabitants of heaven whose prayers aided those on earth. Now only the glass retains its colour but then every wall and statue would have been brilliantly painted and gilded. Through the

The nave of Lincoln Cathedral built between 1209 and 1235. All over England cathedrals were rebuilt in the thirteenth century in the new Gothic style imported from France. In 1220 Bishop Hugh, who died in 1200, was canonised, attracting crowds of pilgrims to Lincoln. Sixty years later in 1280 his bones were moved to the angels' choir, an event attended by Edward I and his queen.



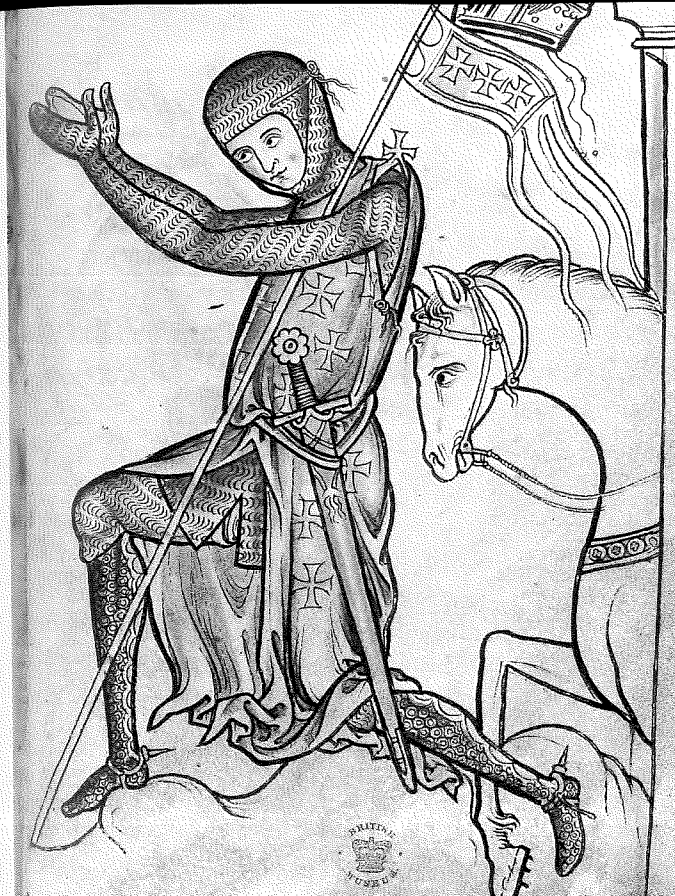


church building each community expressed its identity and its wealth, for it was the setting for the great spiritual events which punctuated man's earthly pilgrimage: baptism, confirmation, penance, communion and burial. The church provided the backcloth too for processions on holy days and for courts, judgements and performances. It could even house a school.

The men of war or *bellatores* were a fluctuating group as great families rose and fell. Nobility was bestowed by birth and expressed by success in arms. Mass knightings of young nobles were staged on feast days of the church and at battles. A knight traditionally had to be able to equip himself with a horse and all the trappings of a cavalryman. In addition he and all his class from earls to the lowliest knight of the shire were bound by the conventions of chivalry. The church's view of the knight cast him into a role as the defender of Holy Church and the weak. In its secular context stress was laid on three great virtues: bravery, loyalty to liege lord and lady and, most of all, on generosity. This accounts for the increasingly lavish living style of the baronial classes who supported huge retinues in attendance upon them. Wealth came through good management of their estates and from the king, who was the fount of patronage and the bestower of gifts in the way of heiresses or lands. The knight's role was to fight or to train for his role as defender through a favourite pastime, the tournament. These began as miniature pitched battles but during the thirteenth century evolved into feats of skill in which two knights charged against each other with lances along a barrier, the lists, and scored points for their skill. In this they displayed prowess not only in honour of their lord but in tribute to their lady who watched from a nearby gallery.

That was some sign that the status of women was slowly changing but they were still devoid of power and had few legal rights. Their role as a humanising influence and as the object of a knight's veneration accelerated a changed attitude beyond that of a chattel. The status of a wife also improved as succession to estates now depended on legitimacy. But the only occasion when women could stand firmly on their own was as widows, when they became highly desirable acquisitions.

At the bottom of this pyramid toiled the *laboratores* or peasants. There had been a huge population growth, and by the year 1300 the population had grown to between four and five million. Agriculture failed to keep pace with the new numbers to be fed and there was widespread poverty and near famine conditions. The peasants' lifestyle had hardly changed from the post-Conquest period. Some were wholly or partly free but the vast majority were villeins, unfree by birth and tied to the land of their lord's manor. For their few strips they continued to pay him in kind through their labour. They still lived in mud and wood one-room dwellings with a central hearth, animals and men together. Their virtually static existence is a reminder that the boundaries of



A knight kneels in homage to his king. Drawing from the middle of the thirteenth century.

the majority of Englishmen in the thirteenth century were literally those of the immediate landscape beyond which they rarely if ever travelled.

This ordered view of society was unquestioned and seemingly immutable. It was viewed as God-ordained, for, above and beyond, it was mirrored in the structure of the universe. This descended, it was believed, in the form of concentric circles downwards from heaven to earth. At the top was heaven presided over by God. Below that extended hierarchies of angels and below them, in turn, the seven planets which circled the earth and whose influence affected everything on it from political events to a man's physical condition. The earth was flat. Jerusalem, the Holy City, stood at its centre while England lay on the fringes of its known extent. Everywhere man looked in medieval England he would have moved with ease from earth to heaven in his thoughts, such was the constant interplay between the two. No wonder that when the great mosaic floor, on which the kings of England were henceforth to be crowned, was laid out for Henry III before the high altar of Westminster Abbey it took the form of the universe in diagram. In the king's view God reigned over the cosmos in the same way that he, as His representative on earth, ruled over the realm of England. It was a view which was to remain unchallenged for the next three hundred and fifty years.