

## Charles II (1630-1685)



*(For the astrologically minded – as most of Charles’s contemporaries were – it is of interest to note that he was born with the Sun in Gemini, Virgo on the ascendant, the Moon and Venus both in Taurus. The celestial picture is thus dominated by Mercury, denoting a quick intelligence and certain restlessness of temperament; there is also an earthy love of pleasure, a stubborn loyalty, and, with Mars in Leo, physical courage).*

*King Charles II by Antonia Fraser*

Charles II, as the eldest surviving son of Charles I, spent part of the English Civil War (1642-1646) fighting on his father’s behalf in the West of England, most notably at the Battle of Edgehill (1642). Forced into exile, he travelled first to Scilly and Jersey. (It was in Jersey that he met the mistress who would father James, Duke of Monmouth.) From exile in France, Charles attempted to save his condemned father by sending a signed blank sheet of paper to Parliament, inviting the Government to write on it whatever terms would save his father’s life.

After his father’s execution in 1649, Charles was proclaimed King of Scotland and some parts of

England and Ireland at Scone in 1651, after he agreed to make Presbyterianism the religion of England and Scotland. Two years later, he invaded England and fought Cromwell at the Battle of Worcester.

Heavily defeated, he once again fled to France, where he lived the existence of a virtual pauper, eventually moving to Germany and then the Spanish Netherlands.

In 1660, Charles’s restoration to the Throne was engineered by General George Monck, an English soldier who had fought for Cromwell, but who had come to realise the importance of the Monarchy in rebuilding the country, which had fallen into anarchy on Cromwell’s death. Charles rode into London on his birthday, 29 May, in 1660. The King’s desire for religious toleration (due in large part to his leanings toward Roman Catholicism) was overwhelmed by the new Parliament. Royalist in nature, they passed the Clarendon Code, which ensured Anglicanism as the state religion and threatened non-conformists. Charles II tried to increase religious tolerance with his Declaration of Indulgence, but was forced to withdraw it.



He entered into a series of diplomatic deals, first with the creation of an alliance between Holland and Sweden. At the same time, without the knowledge of Parliament, he negotiated the Treaty of Dover with Louis XIV. In this secret treaty he agreed, in exchange for £200,000 a year, to convert along with his brother James (the future James II) to Catholicism and continue to war against the Dutch.

He further attempted to encourage Catholic freedom with the passing of another Declaration of Indulgence, but Parliament overruled and came back with further controls against the religion, the infamous Test Act, this time forbidding Catholics from sitting in Parliament or holding public office. His alliance with Louis was forcibly ended at this point, with the brokered marriage of Charles's niece, Mary, to Louis's arch-rival, William of Orange.

By 1678, anti-Catholic sentiment was at the highest point in Charles's reign. The Popish plot insinuated Roman Catholics were set to murder Charles, in order to let his brother, James, reign. Over the next three years, his Royal House suffered the greatest challenges to its existence, with numerable threats by Parliament. The period saw the rise of the Whigs (who wanted James excluded from succession) and the Tories (who wanted no change). In 1681, he dissolved Parliament for the last time, ruled as an absolute Monarch and found himself popular with his subjects once again.

His reign also saw the rise of colonisation and trade in India, the East Indies and America (where he captured New York from the Dutch in 1664), and the passage of Navigation Acts that secured Britain's future as a sea-power. His hedonistic character – he had numerous mistresses and illegitimate children and loved racing and gambling – also informed the birth of the Restoration period in art and literature.

Source: BBCi History