The Stuart dynasty spanned one of the most tumultuous periods in British history - years of civil war, assassination attempts, usurpations, national disaster and revolution. How did it all happen?

Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudor monarchs, died in 1603 and the thrones of England and Ireland passed to her cousin, James Stuart.

Thus James VI of Scotland also became James I of England. The three separate kingdoms were united under a single ruler for the first time, and James I and VI, as he now became, entered upon his unique inheritance.

England, Scotland and Ireland were very different countries, and the memories of past conflict ran deep.

James had awaited Elizabeth's death with eager anticipation, because of the wealth and prestige the English crown would bring him. But, as this canny monarch must have known all too well, the balancing act he would henceforth be required to perform was not an easy one.

England, Scotland and Ireland were very different countries, with very different histories, and the memories of past conflict between those countries - and indeed, of past conflict between different ethnic groups within those countries - ran deep.

To make matters trickier still, each kingdom favoured a different form of religion. Most Scots were Calvinists, most English favoured a more moderate form of Protestantism and most Irish remained stoutly Catholic. Yet each kingdom also contained strong religious minorities.

In England, the chief such group were the Catholics, who initially believed that James would prove less severe to them than Elizabeth had been.

When these expectations were disappointed, Catholic conspirators hatched a plot to blow both the new king and his parliament sky-high.

The discovery of the Gunpowder Plot served as a warning to James, if any were needed, of the very grave dangers religious divisions could pose, both to his own person and to the stability of his triple crown.

Charles I

James I was resolved to keep his kingdoms out of foreign entanglements if he could.

However - following the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to Frederick V, elector of the Rhineland Palatinate; Frederick's crowning as king of Bohemia; and the forcible ejection of the young couple from their new kingdom by Catholic forces soon afterwards - James found himself being dragged into the continental Thirty Years' War.
Many of Charles’s subjects became alienated by his religious policies.

His health failing, the old king died in 1625 and was succeeded by his son Charles, who initially threw himself into the fight against the Catholic powers, but eventually withdrew from the European conflict in 1630.

Charles I was a conscientious and principled ruler, but he was also stubborn, reserved and politically maladroit. From the moment that he first assumed the crown, uneasy murmurs about his style of government began to be heard.

Over the next 15 years, many of Charles’s English subjects became alienated by his religious policies and by his apparent determination to rule without parliaments.

Some, especially the more zealous Protestants, or ‘puritans’, came to believe in the existence of a sinister royal plot - one which aimed at the restoration of the Catholic faith in England and the destruction of the people’s liberties.

Similar fears were abroad in Scotland, and when Charles attempted to introduce a new prayer book to that country in 1637 he provoked furious resistance.

Charles's subsequent attempts to crush the Scots by force went disastrously wrong, forcing him to summon an English parliament in October 1640. Once this assembly had begun to sit, Charles was assailed by angry complaints about his policies.

At first, the king seemed to have practically no supporters. But as puritan members of parliament began to push for wholesale reform of the church and religious traditionalists became alarmed, Charles found himself at the head of a swelling political constituency.

Then, in 1641, the Catholics of Ireland rose up in arms, killing many hundreds of the English and Scottish Protestants who had settled in their country.

The rebellion caused panic in England, and made it harder than ever for a political compromise to be reached. Charles I and parliament could not agree and England began to divide into two armed camps.

The civil war which broke out in 1642 saw a broadly Royalist north and west ranged against a broadly Parliamentarian south and east.

Charles derived particular advantage from the support of the Welsh and the Cornish, who supplied him with many of his foot soldiers, while parliament derived still more advantage from its possession of London.
In mid-1643, it looked as if the king might be about to defeat his opponents, but later that year the Parliamentarians concluded a military alliance with the Scots.

### Charles was tried, found guilty, and beheaded in January 1649.

Following the intervention of a powerful Scottish army and the defeat of the king's forces at Marston Moor in 1644, Charles lost control of the north of Britain.

The following year, Charles was defeated by parliament's New Model Army at Naseby and it became clear that the Royalist cause was lost.

Unwilling to surrender to the Parliamentarians, the king gave himself up to the Scots instead, but when they finally left England, the Scots handed Charles over to their parliamentary allies.

Still determined not to compromise with his enemies, the captive king managed to stir up a new bout of violence known as the Second Civil War.

Realising that the kingdom could never be settled in peace while Charles I remained alive, a number of radical MPs and officers in the New Model Army eventually decided that the king had to be charged with high treason. Charles was accordingly tried, found guilty, and beheaded in January 1649.

In the wake of the king's execution, a republican regime was established in England, a regime which was chiefly underpinned by the stark military power of the New Model Army.

### Fall of the republic

Oliver Cromwell depicted on horseback, 1650 ©

England's new rulers were determined to re-establish England's traditional dominance over Ireland, and in 1649 they sent a force under Oliver Cromwell to undertake the reconquest of Ireland, a task that was effectively completed by 1652.

Meanwhile, Charles I's eldest son had come to an agreement with the Scots and in January 1651 had been crowned as Charles II of Scotland. Later that year, Charles invaded England with a Scottish army, but was defeated by Cromwell at Worcester.

### Cromwell strove to establish broad-based support for godly republican government - with scant success.

The young king just managed to avoid capture, and later escaped to France. His Scottish subjects were left in a sorry plight, and soon the Parliamentarians had conquered the whole of Scotland.

In 1653, Cromwell was installed as 'lord protector' of the new Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. Over the next five years, he strove to establish broad-based support for godly republican government with scant success.
Cromwell died in 1658 and was succeeded as protector by his son, Richard, but Richard had little aptitude for the part he was now called upon to play and abdicated eight months later.

After Richard Cromwell’s resignation, the republic slowly fell apart and Charles II was eventually invited to resume his father's throne. In May 1660, Charles II entered London in triumph. The monarchy had been restored.

Charles II was an intelligent but deeply cynical man, more interested in his own pleasures than in points of political or religious principle. His lifelong preoccupation with his many mistresses did nothing to improve his public image.

The early years of the new king's reign were scarcely glorious ones. In 1665 London was devastated by the plague, while a year later much of the capital was destroyed in the Great Fire of London.

The Dutch raid on Chatham in 1667 was one the most humiliating military reverses England had ever suffered.

Nevertheless, the king was a cunning political operator and when he died in 1685 the position of the Stuart monarchy seemed secure. But things swiftly changed following the accession of his brother, James, who was openly Catholic.

Catholic succession

William III, by Sir Godfrey Kneller ©

James II at once made it plain that he was determined to improve the lot of his Catholic subjects, and many began to suspect that his ultimate aim was to restore England to the Catholic fold.

The birth of James's son in 1688 made matters even worse since it forced anxious Protestants to confront the fact that their Catholic king now had a male heir.

Soon afterwards, a group of English Protestants begged the Dutch Stadholder William of Orange - who had married James II's eldest daughter, Mary, in 1677 - to come to their aid.

Many suspected that James II wanted to bring back Catholicism.

William, who had long been anticipating such a call, accordingly set sail with an army for England. James II fled to France a few weeks later and William and Mary were crowned as joint monarchs the following year.

James II still had many supporters in Ireland, and in March 1689 he landed there with a French army.

William now assembled an army of his own to meet this challenge, and in 1690 he decisively defeated James at the Battle of the Boyne. James promptly returned to France, leaving William free to consolidate his hold on power.
The death of Mary in 1694 left William as sole ruler of the three kingdoms, and by 1700 all eyes were turning to the problem of the succession.

Because neither William nor James II's surviving daughter, Anne, had any children, Protestants were terrified that the throne would eventually revert to James II, to his son, or to one of the many other Catholic claimants.

To avert this danger, the Act of Settlement was passed in 1701, directing that after the deaths of William and Anne the throne would return to the descendants of James I's daughter, Elizabeth.

Sophia, electress of Hanover, and her heirs thus became next in line to the English throne.

In 1702, William died and was succeeded by Anne. Five years after this, a formal union of the kingdoms of England and Scotland was contrived, in order to ensure that there would be a Protestant succession in Scotland too.

Henceforth England and Scotland officially became one country, and when Queen Anne, the last of the Stuart monarchs, died in 1714, it was to the throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain that George I, the first of the Hanoverians, succeeded.

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About the author

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