The Glorious Revolution

During the course of the 17th century, the political system of England changed from the Absolute Monarchy of the Tudors to Constitutional Monarchy and the rule of Parliament.

Constitutional Monarchy is a system of government where the power of the ruler is limited. It is limited by law, limited by a Parliament or legislative branch; and limited, ultimately, by the people. Government depends on the consent of the people. This is a revolutionary principle. It fundamentally challenges the idea that the rulers derive their authority directly from God. Absolute monarchs claim to be unlimited in power and authority. They claim not to be accountable to anyone but themselves, their conscience, and their God.

In France during the 17th century, absolutism prevailed and was symbolized by King Louis XIV. In England, constitutionalism limited the powers of the king and governments.

1. The end of Tudor Absolutism.

Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603. Like her father, she was an absolute monarch. But the Tudors ruled with the support of Parliament.

In England, Parliament was made up of two houses: the House of Lords, representing the hereditary nobility, and the House of Commons, representing the merchants from the towns and the lesser landowners (squires) from the shires of England. Parliament dated back to the Middle Ages when kings were limited in their powers. On the continent, the equivalents of the English Parliament (the Estates General in France, the Cortez in Spain, and the Diet in Germany) were no longer convened as the powers of the kings increased. In England, the Tudors found Parliament useful and kept it. There is no question that Parliament was subservient to the kings under the Tudors.

2. The Early Stuarts: James I and Charles I: Conflict between King and Parliament: 1603 - 1649

She was succeeded by James I of the House of Stuart. James was the first king of England with that name, but he was also the sixth James of Scotland. Under James I, the kingdoms of England and Scotland were dynastically united by having the same king.
James was viewed as a "foreigner" from the English perspective. He did not understand the way Elizabeth had governed her kingdom, in what is called the "Elizabethan Compromise."

Under his rule and that of his son, the traditional relationships between king and parliament broke down. Both the king and parliament made new claims of power that were unprecedented. The kings wanted to raise taxes on their own authority and parliament claimed that no new taxes could be levied without parliamentary approval. There were also growing religious tensions in the kingdom between Anglicans, Puritans, and Scottish Presbyterians.

These tensions lead to Civil War under Charles I. This Civil War is a power struggle between the supporters of the King, the Cavaliers, and the supporters of Parliament, the Roundheads. Parliament's support came from the townspeople many of whom where radical Protestants or Puritans.

3. Civil War: 1642 - 1649

In the person of Oliver Cromwell, the Parliamentary forces found a remarkable leader. Charles I was defeated militarily, tried by Parliament for treason, and executed. It was the first regicide (killing of a king) in modern history.

4. A Puritan Republic, the Commonwealth, and the Protectorate: 1649 - 1660

For eleven years from the execution of Charles I in 1649 to the restoration of his son Charles II in 1660, England and Scotland were republics. Under the Commonwealth and the Protectorate, Great Britain was governed by Oliver Cromwell. The Puritans pioneered many principles of government that were later copied in Massachusetts and the New England colonies. Many ideas, that we now call democratic, derive from these rigidly moralistic fundamentalists. A majority of the English people, however, were not Puritans. They did not like the Puritan laws against the theater, dancing, drinking, and gambling. After Oliver Cromwell died, there was a general groundswell for a restoration of the legitimate king, Charles II.

5. Restoration: 1660 - 1668

The Restored Stuarts governed from 1660 to 1668. Charles II (1660 -1685), a fat self-indulgent man, managed to get on with Parliament, but his younger brother, James II (1685 -1688), once again ran into conflict with Parliament and the influential personages of his kingdom. Religion was, again, one of the root causes of disagreement. James II had married, a second time while in exile during the Cromwell years, a French princess, who was Catholic. It was widely believed that James II was himself a Catholic. When this long-barren marriage produced unexpectedly a son, who was christened as a
Catholic, the country rebelled against the king. It was feared that a Catholic monarchy would try to re-establish Catholicism as the official religion of England. Remember, in the 17th century, all European countries had an official religion and dissenters were not tolerated. Since the Restoration, the official religion of England had been Anglicanism; in Scotland, it remained Presbyterianism. It is difficult to explain to modern students the degree of fear and animosity that religious differences produced at this time. A Catholic king who might restore Catholicism as the official religion of England was simply intolerable to England. The result was the Glorious Revolution.

6. The Glorious Revolution: 1688 - 1689

Between 1688 and 1689, Parliament engineered the ouster of the legitimate male line of Stuart kings and imported a new Protestant king and queen: William III and Mary II. Mary II was the Protestant daughter of James II from his first wife. William was her husband. William of Orange was the Stadtholder of the Dutch Republic and the primary opponent of the French Catholic king Louis XIV.

William managed to take a small fleet from the Netherlands to England and marched on London to the cheers of the crowds who welcomed him. James II and his family fled London to seek refuge, once again, at the court of Louis XIV. James II fled because he remembered the fate of his father. The ouster of James II and the victory of William and Mary were largely bloodless. Parliament had engineered a change of government. Parliament had proven its ultimate superiority to the king. This was the Glorious Revolution.

The Glorious Revolution established the victory of Parliament over the King. Various contested issues of power were resolved in favor of Parliament. Parliament had to be convened regularly. All new taxes had to be approved by Parliament. The king and his family had to belong to the Anglican religion. New political arrangements were made with Scotland.

7. The Later Protestant Stuarts: 1689 - 1714

William and Mary did not have any children. After both monarchs had died, the crown went to Anne, another of James II’s Protestant daughters. When Anne died, the next Protestant heirs of the Stuarts were the rulers of the German state of Hanover.

8. The Hanoverian Kings and the Development of the Parliamentary System

George I (1714–1727) was the first of the Hanoverian line of English kings. It should be noted that the male line of the Catholic Stuarts continued to live in France and periodically fomented rebellion to make themselves kings, unsuccessfully.
Neither King George I nor George II (1727 - 1660) were fluent in English. They were absolute rulers in their German territories in Hanover and did not understand nor care much about England. They did not preside over the regular meetings of the Cabinet. In their absence, the Chancellor of the Exchequer became the first minister, the Prime Minister. Sir Robert Walpole performed this function from 1721 to 1742. He was responsible to both the king and to a majority of the House of Commons. When he lost his parliamentary majority, he resigned his position even though he still had the confidence of the king. He provided a model for others to follow.

Extracted from: The Glorious Revolution, by Dr. Harold Damerow, Senior Professor of Government and History, Union County College, Cranford, New Jersey at http://faculty.ucc.edu/egh-damerow/glorious_revolution.htm