Opening extract from

The Usborne History Of Britain

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This photograph shows Merton College, part of Oxford University. The tower belongs to the chapel.

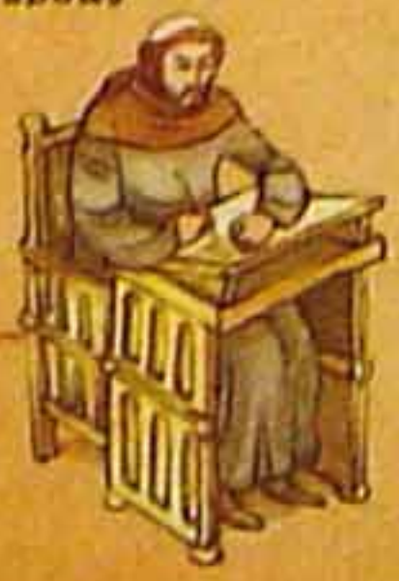
Learning

There was a strong connection between education and the Church in medieval Britain. Some men dedicated their lives to religion by becoming monks, usually living apart from the rest of society in religious communities known as monasteries. Monks spent most of their time praying, working or studying, and lived by strict rules – they had to give up most of their possessions, ate plain food, avoided comfort and weren't allowed to marry.

During the Early Middle Ages, monasteries were the main places of learning, as monks preserved and copied out ancient texts handed down from ancient scholars. Their books, known as *manuscripts*, were hand-written and often richly illustrated, or *illuminated*. These books took a lot of work, so they were extremely valuable: a single book could be worth around the same as an entire field of wheat.

Scribes

Monks who produced hand-lettered manuscripts worked in a writing room known as a *scriptorium*. One monk working alone would have taken about a year to copy out the Bible.



Wider knowledge

The first schools were set up to educate future monks and priests. There was a greater demand for educated parish priests, as people expected them to understand the Bible and to be able to preach sermons. Men seeking well-paid jobs outside the Church needed to know some Latin, too, to make legal records, or to keep accounts. Boys could get a basic education at elementary schools, called song schools, and soon all towns and a few villages had grammar schools which provided an advanced education in Latin.

Some boys went on to higher education. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were established by the beginning of the thirteenth century, followed by one at St. Andrews in Scotland in 1413. Young men usually entered university when they were around fourteen years old, and studied for six years. They took lessons in subjects including philosophy, religious studies, geometry, algebra and music, to prepare them for careers in the Church.

But university graduates didn't just become parish priests or monks. They often found work as clerks, government officials, or school teachers, instead.

Going for gold

During the Middle Ages, a few men began conducting experiments into the natural sciences and *alchemy* – the science of turning lead, and other base metals, into more precious metals, such as gold. Among them, was a monk named Roger Bacon. Although he and his fellow alchemists never achieved their aim, they did make many discoveries about the properties of different metals. Bacon was also the first person to record making a rainbow by shining white light through glass.

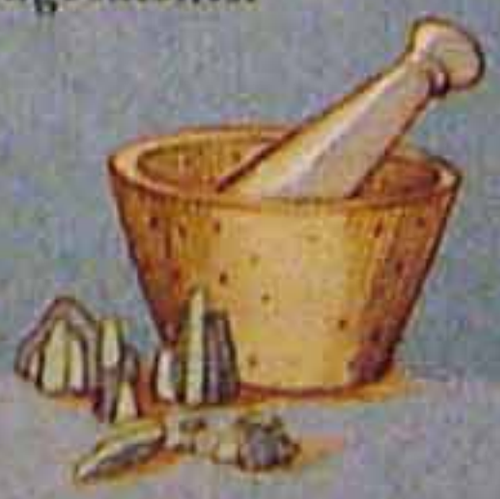
Marvellous medicine

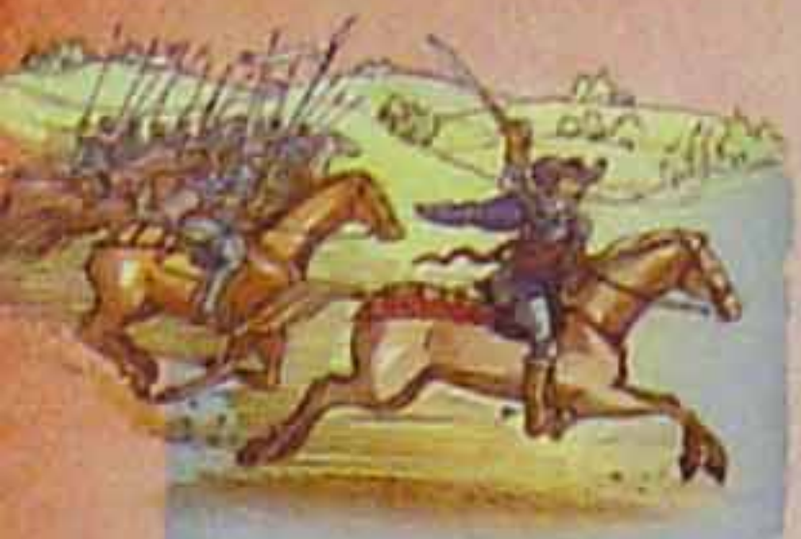
Doctors studied ancient Greek and Arabic medical texts about herbal remedies and other treatments. But some medicines worked better than others...

Doctors gave patients willow bark to treat fevers. This eventually led to the development of aspirin, a drug widely used today.

Leeches, a kind of blood-sucking worm, were used to draw blood from patients who were thought to have the wrong balance of fluids in the body.

Some unscrupulous doctors charged a fortune for medicines that might not work, by claiming that they included rare and expensive ingredients.





Oliver Cromwell

Oliver Cromwell was a Puritan who became MP for Huntingdon in 1628. When war broke out he joined the army, and rose rapidly through the ranks. He led the Parliamentarian cavalry at Marston Moor and at Naseby.

Victory and defeat

After the Battle of Marston Moor, the Royalists were all but defeated. Charles had missed his chance to capture London and win the war, and now he was running out of money. His soldiers were mostly local troops who did not want to travel too far away from their homes, and this meant that he couldn't move his armies around freely.

Meanwhile, the Parliamentarian army was getting even stronger. An MP named Oliver Cromwell persuaded Parliament to create a 'New Model Army' made up of professional soldiers, who were fiercer and tougher than the untrained Royalist troops.

In 1645 the New Model Army was put to the test, when it faced the King's army at the Battle of Naseby. Cromwell's soldiers crushed their opponents, and the Royalists fled.

The Battle of Naseby was the end for Charles. Soon afterwards he gave himself up to the Scots, hoping for protection – but in 1647, they handed him over to Parliament. It looked as if the war had been won.

Unlike Charles, the Puritan Oliver Cromwell did not want to be flattered in paintings. This portrait shows him 'warts and all' – with a red face and a shiny nose.

The second war

Charles had one last chance to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. While he was imprisoned at Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight, the King persuaded the Scots to change sides and join the Royalists. But it was all in vain. In 1648, the final battle of the Civil War was fought at Preston. It was another resounding victory for the New Model Army.

The King on trial

The leaders of the New Model Army thought Charles was too dangerous to be kept alive. They saw his alliance with Scotland as treason, and argued that he should be put on trial. But Charles claimed that the courts had no right to try the King.

A vote was held in Parliament to decide whether there should be a trial. That day, Cromwell's soldiers surrounded the House of Commons, keeping out any MPs they thought would vote against trying the King. Cromwell and his allies had already decided on the verdict: Charles was sentenced to death, and the monarchy abolished.

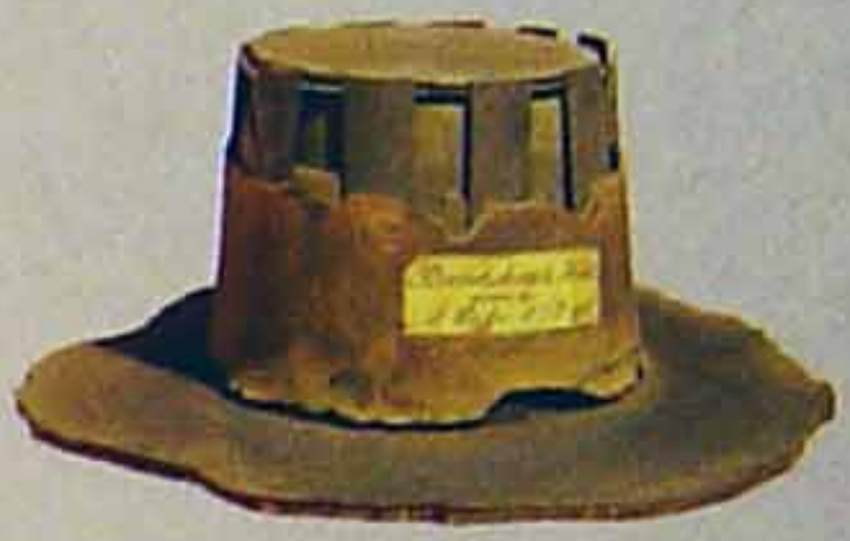
On January 30, 1649, King Charles I was beheaded outside the Banqueting House in London. There was no rejoicing. As the blow fell, the crowd let out a huge groan. Many sobbed openly.

Rule by Parliament

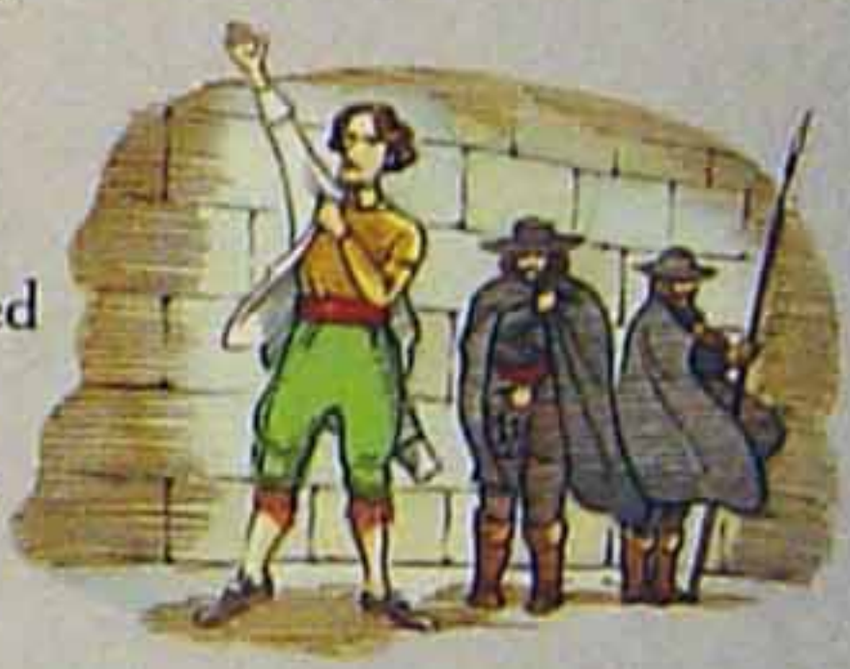
For the first time in a thousand years, the country had no monarch. Instead, it was ruled by Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell, who had risen from the middle classes to become the most powerful man in the land. His rule came to be known as the Commonwealth.

Trial and execution

No one wanted to be the man to sentence Charles to death. In the end, John Bradshaw reluctantly agreed to be judge at the King's trial.



Bradshaw was so scared of being assassinated that he wore this hat, lined with steel, to stop bullets.



The day of Charles's execution was freezing cold. Proud until the end, he asked for an extra shirt to wear, so the crowd wouldn't think he was shivering with fear.