

The Two Charles

Charles I and Charles II

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The lives of father and son are so entwined that it would be difficult to think of one without the other. In many ways they are very similar, and in some very different.

Charles I was slight, fair and not particularly agile. His son was tall, broad shouldered and strong – unusually so for his time. Physically they differed, but in temperament they were very alike.

Charles II deeply loved his father, while having a somewhat more embittered attitude to his mother, Queen Henrietta Maria. She was the daughter of Henri IV of France, and had been brought up in the Catholic tradition, to which she remained faithful all her life. Her son had had the traditions of the largely Protestant England forced upon him. He disliked the Scots, and allied himself with his English subjects, while also befriending the Covenanters. A foot in both camps!

Charles I and his Queen were ideally happy and Charles remained faithful to her. The marriage of his son was different. In 1662 Charles II married a Portuguese Princess, Catherine of Braganza, but he also had various mistresses and children born the 'wrong side of the blanket.' This was regarded as acceptable in that loose living age. It would appear that Charles II's wife accepted his affairs with equanimity. There is no record of dissension between them. Charles treated his mistresses and children with his customary generosity, giving them money and titles.



Some of his mistresses were high born and prominent in society and very much interested in their own well being. Others, such as Lucy Walter, light-heartedly loved Charles.

Charles I took refuge in Oxford, but was eventually captured and condemned to death. His son, until the last moment, could not believe that his father would be executed.

Meantime, a new figure had entered public life; a landowner from Huntingdon, Oliver Cromwell. With his friends John Hampden and others he formed a Parliament. Charles I could not afford to alienate Parliament as he needed money to finance his many wars.

Charles I was taken to the scaffold. The king laid his head tranquilly on the block and prayed for his dependents. Chaucer's description of a 'very gentle parfait knight' 'nothing in life so became him as the leaving of it' could have applied to Charles I.

11 years after his father's death, Charles II was proclaimed King in the City of London. He survived the plague and then spent days fighting the fire of London. He stressed the need to pull down buildings to prevent the fire spreading, but his advice was largely ignored. This was another occasion when he displayed the gallantry of his nature.

But after his father's death he was a changed man. He withdrew from public life and concentrated on establishing a firm economy. After he died in 1685, it was said of him that he was loved by his family and loved and respected by his subjects.

What better epitaph could have been written?