What kind of ruler was Oliver Cromwell?

Key people & events

Key dates

December 1653	Cromwell became Lord Protector. He ruled with the Council of State, advisers chosen by him.
September 1654	Cromwell's first Parliament met. MPs were forced to swear loyalty to him or resign. At the same time Cromwell made great efforts to achieve what he called 'healing and settlement'. This meant fair and efficient government for all.
November 1654	Cromwell introduced excise (a tax on all goods bought and sold). This was not approved by Parliament.
January 1655	Cromwell dismissed his first Parliament and ruled without Parliament.
August 1655	Cromwell put Britain under military rule. He appointed eleven Major Generals to rule the country. This approach was unsuccessful and unpopular.
September 1656	The Second Protectorate Parliament met, but only after 100 MPs opposed to Cromwell were banned.
January 1657	Cromwell agreed to end the system of Major Generals.
March 1657	MPs came up with a new system for government in the 'Humble Petition and Advice'. Many MPs, and Cromwell's supporters, urged him to make himself king. Cromwell refused the crown, but was confirmed as Lord Protector.
February 1658	Cromwell dismissed Parliament after more disputes with MPs.
September 1658	Cromwell died. His son Richard became Lord Protector, but was forced to retire in May 1659.
1660	No acceptable person could be found to take over as Lord Protector. Parliament invited Charles II (son of Charles I) back to restore the monarchy. This is known as 'The Restoration'.

Cromwell as Lord Protector

Cromwell was a most remarkable person. He seemed to be torn in two directions much of the time.

- He wanted good Protestants to be free to worship God the way they
 thought was right. He did not force people to go to Church of England
 services every Sunday the way Charles I had done. On the other hand,
 he was extremely tough towards those he felt might have been a threat
 to the Protestant Church of England.
- He and many other Puritans (Protestants who wanted a simple and strict religious life) wanted to make England more godly. By this, they wanted the population to be religious, have good manners, be sober, and avoid rowdy entertainments and so on. This proved deeply unpopular with many ordinary people. It is one reason why Cromwell had a reputation as a miserable person when in fact Cromwell liked a good joke!
- Cromwell believed in the importance of Parliament and tried hard to work with MPs. On the other hand, he dismissed Parliament twice during his rule and often argued with MPs.
- Cromwell's power rested on the support of the army and he wanted to work with Parliament to pass laws. Cromwell had to try to keep the MPs and the army happy. However, MPs and the army were often at odds. MPs disliked the army and the high taxes needed to pay for it. The leaders of the army tended to be political and religious radicals who held extreme views. They distrusted the MPs, many of whom would have put Charles I back in power after the first Civil War.
- Cromwell was as powerful as a king. Yet when he was offered the throne in 1657 he refused it.

Cromwell after his death

Perhaps the factor that makes Cromwell most difficult to understand is what happened to him after his death. When Cromwell died in 1658 there was no really strong candidate to take over from him. His son Richard became Lord Protector for a short while, but he was not the right man for the job. Eventually, the army commanders and MPs decided to ask Charles II to return as king in 1660.

Charles II blamed Cromwell for the death of his father. He removed Cromwell's body from its grave and had it hung like a common criminal. He then took Cromwell's head and set it on a spike. It was not just Cromwell's body that was attacked. So were his character and his record as a ruler. Many of the historical sources about Cromwell were written by people who knew Cromwell before 1660, but wrote after 1660 and had personal reasons to criticise him. This means we have to be very careful about what the sources from this period said about him.

Find out more

The Cromwell Association http://www.olivercromwell.org/

Cromwell Online Exhibition

http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/exhibitions/Cromwell/gallery/gallery.htm

Oliver Cromwell

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/cromwell_oliver.shtml

The 17th Century: War

http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/war/

Oliver Cromwell – An outline for term papers

http://www.cromwell-intl.com/oliver/

This American website is amusing once you know something about Cromwell. It is designed to stop students from simply copying and pasting material from the Internet without reading the material, as it has a few deliberate errors in it!