

Queen Elizabeth I Opens Parliament

Leopold von Wedel



OVERVIEW

Leopold von Wedel's diary of his travels through England in 1584 includes this description of the lavish ceremony that accompanied the opening of a session of England's Parliament. His account is colorful but contains some factual errors. For example, this session of Parliament was not the first in Elizabeth's reign, and she had just reached the age of 51.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- According to this account, what was one of the functions of Parliament?
 - Why do you think Parliament was infrequently held during Queen Elizabeth I's reign?
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The Queen has reigned already twenty-six years, and during her reign Parliament has never been held. This year she enters her fifty-third year, as it is said, and she has sent orders through the whole realm to convoke Parliament. The principal cause is, I am told, that the English do not wish the King of Scotland, who is the next to the throne, to be King of England, and wish to know who after the queen's death is to wear the crown. I have forgotten the exact date, but I believe the opening of Parliament took place on November 25th. All the streets and lanes in Westminster were well cleaned and strewn with sand when the queen made her entrance into the house, for it is a custom that on the first and last day of the session the king or queen shall be present in the assembly. At the head of the procession rode, two by two, eighteen lords and gentlemen of the court, after them fifteen trumpets, two gentlemen, each with 100 soldiers uniformly clad; now came fifteen members of Parliament in long red cloth coats, lined with white rabbit and reverses of the same almost down to the girdle. Next followed two gentlemen, the first with the queen's mantle, the other with her hat, their horses were led by servants. Now came two heralds, each in a blue mantle with two wings on it of beaten gold bearing the queen's arms, then three pairs of gentlemen of the Parliament in their usual robes, two heralds like those before followed by thirteen gentlemen of the Parliament, counts and barons, like the former, two heralds, seven pairs of bishops in long red robes with broad reverses of white linen and square caps of black stuff on their heads, then came five pairs of gentlemen of the Parliament in long red coats set with four stripes of rabbit fur. Now followed the Chancellor of the realm, behind him the Treasurer and the Secretary in their usual robes, with broad golden collars hanging down in the front and back to the saddle. Followed four men with sceptres, each ornamented with a crown, followed some gentlemen of the Parliament like the

others. All these, I have mentioned, had gold and silver trappings on their horses, the least valuable being velvet. Followed the huntsmen, about fifty in number, all of noble birth, with small spears. These marched on foot. Now followed a horse, led by a gentleman, the trappings, saddle and bridle all of gold covered with pearls, the latter being set with precious stones. On the forehead an ornament was fixed with one large diamond, and on the ears hung pearls. Now followed the queen in a half-covered sedan chair, which looked like a half-covered Bed. The chair and the cushions on which the queen was seated were covered with gold and silver cloth. The queen had a long red velvet parliamentary mantle, down to the waist, lined with ermine, white with little black dots, and a crown on her head. The sedan chair was carried by two cream-coloured horses with yellow manes and tails, on the heads and tails yellow and white plumes were fastened, and they had saddles and trappings of golden stuff. Behind the queen another horse was led, having trappings of red velvet fringed with gold and ornamented with plumes.... On both sides of the queen marched her guard, not in their daily suit, but clad in red cloth, covered with beaten gold. The procession took its way to Westminster Church, where all the kings are buried. Here the queen dismounted, knelt down at the entrance and said her prayers, entered the church, where prayers were offered and chants performed. Then the queen went to the house of Parliament close by, and was led into a separate chamber, on the platform of which was a splendid canopy of golden stuff and velvet, embroidered with gold, silver and pearls, and below it a throne, arranged with royal splendours, on which the queen seated herself. The benches in this chamber had their seats as well as the backs covered with red silk, in the midst four wooolsacks of red cloth were laid square. The walls were entirely hung with royal tapestry. In front of the wooolsacks opposite the door a low bar was fixed right across the chamber, also covered with red silk. On the woolsack nearest to the queen's throne sits the Chancellor, turning his back to the queen, on that to the right hand sit three judges, on that to the left three secretaries. Close to the bar, but outside of it, sit two [writing] clerks, on the benches around to the right side twenty bishops, two viscounts or peers, one marquis, to the left twenty counts and twenty barons. Thus the sitting of this Parliament began, they had sittings every day until Christmas, but the queen, as I said before, was present only on the first and last day. During the holy feast the sitting was suspended, but afterwards it began again and lasted until Easter, when it was again suspended, though not closed, and was to begin again. Meanwhile I left the country.