



## Background

### Rowland Lee and lawlessness in Wales

In 1534, to strengthen the Crown's authority in Wales, Cromwell appointed Rowland Lee, Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, as President of the Welsh Council. Lee held this position until his death in 1543. At the time, Wales had a reputation for being lawless, and Lee believed that the Welsh could only be governed through fear, making his rule very brutal. He even boasted of having hanged 5,000 men in his first six years in Wales – a significant number given the population levels at the time.

During Lee's time in charge, he worked to centralise the Crown's authority and bring stability to Wales under the Tudor monarchy. In 1534, Parliament passed several statutes to strengthen Lee's power. These laws gave Justices of the Peace (JPs) the authority to enter Marcher lordships to arrest criminals, thereby ending traditional Welsh practices like *commortha* and *arddel*, where lords protected strangers. With these new powers, Lee quickly began suppressing criminals and enforcing law and order.

### Fear of resistance and foreign invasion linked to the Henrician Reformation

The dramatic changes in Church-State relations increased the urgency to govern Wales, especially with concerns about potential invasions along its coastline. Wales and the Marches were poorly governed, raising alarms during a time of uncertainty about Catholic France and Spain's military responses to England's Reformation. The Welsh were generally conservative in their religious beliefs, showing loyalty to Queen Catherine and her daughter, as well as sympathy for Irish rebels. This led the government to fear a real threat of foreign troops landing in sparsely populated Wales, far from England's power centres – a scenario which seemed plausible, given how King Henry VII had used a similar invasion strategy.

## Administrative details

### The role of Thomas Cromwell in influencing what the Acts changed

Thomas Cromwell was Henry VIII's chief minister and a leading advocate for centralising power. He aimed to streamline governance across England and its territories, including Wales. His push to reduce local autonomy aligned with the **Acts of Union**, which abolished the semi-independent **Marcher lordships** and brought them under the direct control of Wales. Cromwell oversaw major changes to England's legal and administrative systems, which served as a model for integrating Wales. He effectively laid the foundation for the **Acts of Union**.

### Uniformity in government in terms of counties and offices, such as sheriffs and Justices of the Peace (JPs) and the courts of Quarter Sessions and Great Sessions

Under the Acts of Union, the Principality and the land controlled by the Marcher lords were joined together to form a united Wales. Like England, Wales was divided into shires, and Justices of the Peace (JPs) were responsible for law and order in each county. JPs, usually landowners appointed annually, attended the Courts of Quarter Sessions (for lesser crimes, meeting four times a year) and the Courts of Great Sessions (for serious crimes like murder). Each county was also assigned a sheriff, whose duties included maintaining law and order and overseeing court orders.

The Acts of Union also allowed Wales to be represented in Parliament. In 1542, 27 people from Wales were elected to the House of Commons, although most elections were uncontested, with candidates selected by wealthy families in the shire. The Acts also required Welsh officials and MPs to speak English and stated that law courts in Wales had to use the English language. This angered many Welsh people, as it undermined their language and culture.

## The impact of the Acts

### The importance of the language clauses of the Acts

Around 150 of the 7,500 words in the 1536 Act of Union dealt with the Welsh language. It stated that English would be the only language used in courts, and Welsh speakers could not hold government roles. Outside areas like south Pembrokeshire and parts of the border, most of the population were monoglot Welsh speakers, meaning they had to use interpreters in courts.

The English Crown wanted uniform administration across England and Wales, leading to the creation of a Welsh ruling class fluent in English. Despite many Welsh gentry speaking Welsh, the number of those fluent in English rose rapidly after the Acts of Union.

### The extent to which Wales was assimilated into, rather than unified with, England

The Acts of Union did not create a partnership or equal union between England and Wales. Welsh institutions were replaced with English systems, which effectively removed Wales' distinct legal identity.

The Welsh language and culture were marginalised. For example, the Acts required all administrative and legal proceedings in Wales to be conducted in English, excluding non-English-speaking Welsh people from fully participating in governance.

Wales became subject to the authority of the English Crown and Parliament, with no separate representation or autonomy. Welsh laws and courts were abolished and replaced by English law and the English legal system.