



# 10 WORST BRITONS

The BBC's nationwide poll to discover who the public thought was the greatest Briton of all (winner: Winston Churchill) was a huge success. But who was the worst Briton? YORK MEMBERY asked ten leading historians who they believe had the most malign influence on the country. The result is a fascinating, if not strictly scientific, top ten of the most wicked, harmful and downright evil character of each century in the last thousand years. The poll highlighted some famous, and not so famous (or infamous) names: our rogue's gallery includes a king, a prime minister, a duke, and (somewhat surprisingly) a couple of churchmen. It's a thought-provoking and perhaps controversial list. Read on to discover who were the worst Brits of all

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JONTY CLARK

Journalist and biographer **York Membery** has written on travel, history and business for the *Economist* and *Financial Times*



## 1000–1100

### Eadric Streona

Nominated by Professor **Sarah Foot** of Sheffield University

**E**adric Streona (died 1017) might have been Aethelred II's chief counsellor and ealdorman of Mercia – but he has a reputation for deception, treachery and murder.

Moreover, he was a significant player in England's defeat by the Danish king Cnut. He was implicated in the murder of Gunnhild and Pallig in 1002 and of Ealdorman Aelfhelm in 1006 – at which time the ealdorman's two sons,

Wulfheah and Ufegeat, were blinded. In 1009 when the English were ready to attack the Danes a Chronicler reported that the whole people "was hindered by Ealdorman Eadric, then as it always was". In 1015 he was directly involved in the murder of two thegns (noblemen) – Sigeferth and Morcar – who, according to chronicles, he "enticed" into his chamber where they were "basely killed". In the same year, having been in command of King Aethelred's army, he changed sides and joined Cnut. He subsequently switched sides a further couple of times, in 1016 joining first Edmund Ironside and then deserting him at the battle at Assandun (Ashingdon) to rejoin Cnut who pursued Edmund into Gloucestershire where the latter died in mysterious circumstances.

This cruel, unscrupulous individual grew rich out of the proceeds of royal taxation and was a traitor to the English cause. But having being initially rewarded by Cnut – when he'd become king of all England – Eadric was killed in 1017 having outlived his usefulness to the new regime. It was a fitting end.

*Monastic life in Anglo-Saxon England* by Sarah Foot will be published in 2006

## 1200–1300

### King John

Nominated by historian **Marc Morris**

**O**nce described as a man of "superhuman wickedness", King John of England (1167–1216) has had a pretty awful press. Perhaps his most damning critic was Matthew Paris, a monk at St Albans, who in the mid 13th century wrote: "Foul as it is, Hell itself is defiled by the fouler presence of King John".

This kind of verdict was eagerly seized on by 19th-century historians to create the monster of legend, the Bad King John. However, the fact remains that John committed some wicked deeds and was a deeply unpleasant person. He was unpleasant in many ways – in the way he behaved towards people; he was untrusting; he would snigger at people while they talked; he couldn't resist kicking a man when he was down. What's more, he was a bully and a gloater. Stories about his cruelty are legion, and the deed which has most damned him in the eyes of the world is the murder, possibly by his own hands, of his nephew Arthur – a rival for the throne.

Granted, John was competent when it came to the small-scale tyrant stuff – he could lead an army, he was energetic and dynamic – his charisma was all negative. But he didn't inspire loyalty, so people deserted him. That was partly why he lost his father's continental lands – in effect, squandering the family inheritance. He

## 1100–1200 Thomas Becket

Nominated by Professor **John Hudson** of St Andrews University

**T**here are a handful of characters in history about whom prejudice seems impossible to avoid. One such is Thomas Becket (c 1120–70), Archbishop of Canterbury. He divided England in a way that even many churchmen who shared some of his views thought unnecessary and self-indulgent. And he has remained a figure inspiring both devotion and detestation. He was a founder of gesture politics, with the most acute of eye for what would now be called the photo-opportunity. He was also a master of the soundbite. When put on trial in front of a secular court, he refused to accept its jurisdiction, stating "such as I am, I am your father; I will not hear your judgement". He pushed his way from the court chamber, bearing his cross before him. Complex issues were confronted by a mixture of inflexibility and grand display.

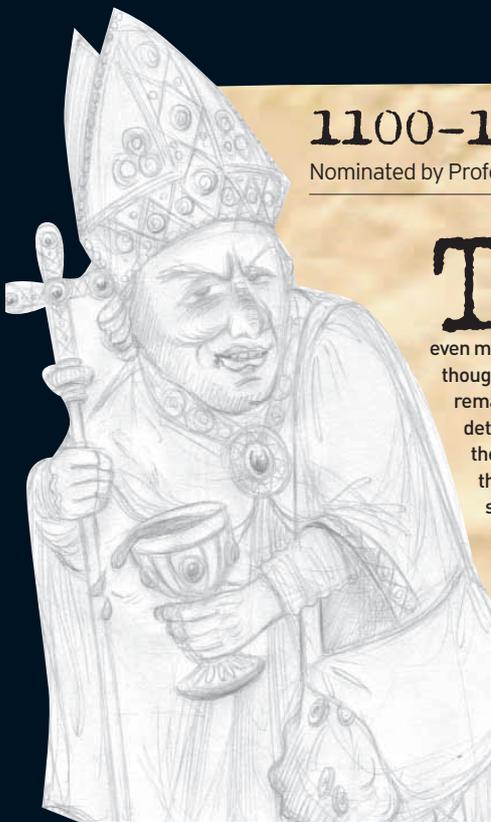
When he left England during his dispute with Henry II, he went to the kingdom of France, furthering the conflict between Henry and the French king, and at the very least opening himself to the accusation of being a traitor.

Certainly he was viewed by some as hypocritical, as he changed dramatically from his ostentatious life-style before he was archbishop. As archbishop, he also looked to contemporary medical views for help in retaining some enjoyable habits, claiming to have to drink wine rather than water because it better suited his stomach.

He was also greedy. In 1164 he was brought to trial in part on charges of embezzlement during his time as royal chancellor, the position he held before he became archbishop of Canterbury. The truth of such charges must remain uncertain. However, the wealth of Thomas and his following by the late 1150s was immense and famous. How did he assemble such wealth? Presumably by profiting from his position in the royal administration.

Those who share my prejudice against Becket may consider his assassination in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December 1170 a fittingly grisly end. However, it also ensured that, as a martyr, he became a saint with a cult that spread with tremendous speed.

John Hudson is currently writing *The Oxford History of the Laws of England, c 900–1220*





was clearly one of the worst kings in English history and his reign will always be defined by that one great evil deed – the murder of his nephew. The only good thing to come out of his reign was Magna Carta, the celebrated attempt to limit royal power.

Marc Morris wrote and presented the series *Castle* for Channel 4. His latest book is *The Bigod Earls of Norfolk in the Thirteenth Century* (Boydell, 2005)

## 1300–1400 **Hugh Despenser (the Younger)**

Nominated by **Nigel Saul**, professor of medieval history at Royal Holloway, London University

**I**n **nominate Edward II's** appalling favourite, the Younger Hugh Despenser (died 1326). Despenser is not so well known, or so notorious, as his predecessor in Edward's favour, Piers Gaveston, but he was far worse. Gaveston was just a playboy. Despenser was pure evil.

Dominant at court in the last years of Edward's reign, he set about eliminating his enemies and amassing a vast territorial empire in South Wales. His rapacity knew no bounds. He gobbled up the lands and possessions forfeited by those who opposed him and his king. He browbeat the weak and the vulnerable into signing away their estates. He tricked people into parting with their property.

Women were especially vulnerable to his ambitions. Alice Lacy, the Earl of Lancaster's widow, was thrown into prison and forced to sign away her rights. The widow of Sir John Gifford of Brimpsfield was ejected from her estates. Lady Baret of Swansea was allegedly tortured so badly that she went out of her mind. Visiting merchants were robbed of their property. In a stained glass window in Tewkesbury Abbey, Despenser looks all arrogant and swagger.

But pride cometh before the fall. In the autumn of 1326 the tyrannical regime he headed was toppled, and Edward deposed. At Hereford in November he was visited with the full penalties of the traitor. He was drawn, and then hanged from a gallows 50 feet high; his intestines were torn out and burned in front of him.

Nigel Saul's latest book is *The Three Richards: Richard I, Richard II and Richard III* (Hambledon & London, 2005)



Who do you think was the Worst Briton in history?  
Write to us at the address on page 97

## 1400–1500 **Thomas Arundel**

Nominated by **Miri Rubin**, professor of history at Queen Mary, University of London

**T**homas Arundel (1353–1414), administrator and archbishop of Canterbury, earns his place in this list of infamy not for a single infamous act, but for the long-term effect of his success in bringing together church and state, as never before, in the persecution of unorthodox religious opinion.

In this link between religious ideas and sedition lay the foundation for a system of persecution of religious ideas in England which would be used by rulers for centuries. Until Arundel, England had no part in the intensive inquisitorial and persecutory activities which had long been common practice on much of the Continent. The Concordat between Henry IV and Arundel gradually created such a system through ordinances and statutes.

At Oxford in 1407 he phrased ordinances – later extended as Constitutions for the realm – which limited the translation and reading of the Bible in English. The programme was completed shortly after his death, when secular officials, royal justices and sheriffs, were required by oath to enquire into heresy wherever their powers took them. As a result, he made life harder for a generation of people who wished to express and explore their religious ideas, to read the Bible in a language they understood, and discuss the "big questions", while his clearing out of "venomous weeds" from Oxford meant that intellectual life there became bland for a very long time. Above all, by enlisting royal officials, and encouraging neighbours to snoop, suspect and inform – he authorised a thoroughly unpleasant involvement of the state in people's lives.

*The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages* by Miri Rubin was published by Penguin in 2005



## 1500–1600

### Sir Richard Rich, Lord Rich of Leighs

Nominated by **David Loades**, emeritus professor of history at the University of Wales

**I**'ve chosen Sir Richard Rich (1496/7–1567), who seems to have had no principles, political or religious, but simply joined whichever side seemed likeliest to further his career.

According to John Foxe (author of the *Acts & Monuments of the English Martyrs*, first published in 1563), he was personally responsible for the torture

of Anne Askew – who'd broken off her marriage to an orthodox Catholic – in 1546. He is even reputed to have operated the machine himself despite the fact that women (and especially gentlewomen) were supposed to be exempt from torture.

He is alleged to have committed perjury to secure the conviction of Thomas More for treason. He promoted Protestantism under Edward VI, and then persecuted Protestants under Mary.

A lawyer by profession, Rich was a man who was constantly on the make, constantly on the lookout for the main chance. He became a powerful minister to Henry VIII and was Lord Chancellor during much of King Edward VI's reign.

It is difficult to quite know what to make of him personally but nobody seems to have been very fond of him. Greedy he certainly was, and cruel – to judge from the Anne Askew affair. He was responsible for several burnings of heretics in Essex, and acted as a bigot because it was convenient to appear as such at that time.

In short, Rich was a slippery and unprincipled opportunist. For centuries after his death his name was a byword in the county of Essex for wickedness. Right up to the 20th century, it was said "better a poor man at ease than Lord Rich of Leighs".

David Loades is the author of *Intrigue and Treason: the Tudor Court 1547–1558* (Pearson, 2004). His book *The Church of Mary Tudor* will be published by Ashgate early in 2006

## 1700–1800

### Duke of Cumberland

Nominated by Professor **Rab Houston**, chair of modern history at St Andrews University

**T**he Duke of Cumberland (Prince William Augustus, 1721–65) showed his wickedness in many ways, not least in his contempt for opponents and for his own men who failed to live up to his own strict standards.

He showed a particular disdain for the defeated Jacobites after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, who he regarded as cowardly, dishonourable and undeserving of mercy. Thus fleeing soldiers were pursued and slaughtered while the wounded could expect no help except to be shot, bayoneted or clubbed to death.

At a time when the etiquette of warfare was considered very important, Cumberland was able to dispense with it by labelling the Highlanders as inhuman savages. He even condemned officers who had shown mercy to the Jacobite soldiers after the battle, when his orders were to give no quarter. The Highlanders hated him, renaming a weed Stinking Billy in mockery of the English renaming of a flower Sweet William in his honour.

In effect, he used the full power of the fiscal-military British state to commit genocide on the mainland of Britain. He was the equal of Cromwell in Ireland, terrorising a whole people into submission.

The English welcomed the Duke's victory but opinion turned against him equally quickly. He acquired the title of Butcher because, when told that

## 1600–1700 Titus Oates

Nominated by **John Adamson**, a fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge University

**T**he self-styled Dr Titus Oates (1649–1705) was in a league of his own, both in the depths of his vileness – a comprehensive blend of vanity, murderous con-trickery, and serpentine guile – and the scale of the evil for which he was responsible.

He was the principal promoter, in 1678, of the fantasy that there was a Jesuit conspiracy to assassinate Charles II (with silver bullets) as a prelude to a French-backed Catholic reconquest of the country.

Undoubtedly his most evil act was allowing sixteen innocent laymen, and eight Catholic priests, to go to a hideous death (the penalty for treason being partial hanging, castration and disembowelment alive, and then the quartering of the corpse) as a result of his spurious accusations.

Oates's entire career was built on the purveyance of various forms of malice and falsity. At the height of the Popish Plot mania, he laid an indictment against the Lord Chief Justice who, refusing to succumb to

the popular hysteria, had acquitted four of the men implicated by Oates's accusations. He would have willingly sent these four, and the Chief Justice, to the gallows for his own aggrandisement.

Anyone who is prepared to see innocent men go to their deaths – and particularly grisly deaths at that – on accusations that he knows to be false qualifies as cruel, bloodthirsty, and a bigot. What makes Oates's knavery all the more invidious is that his motives appear to have been largely financial: he expected, and eventually obtained, a substantial reward from the Whig interests which profited from his accusations.

In 1678–79, Oates's actions arguably brought the country close to the brink of another civil war. And while Oates did not create anti-Popery, his fantasies certainly sharply exacerbated a religious hatred that would endure in British society well into the 19th century. In short, he was a thoroughly odious individual.

*The Noble Revolt: A History of the English Civil War* by John Adamson will be published in 2006 by Weidenfeld and Nicolson





he was to be made an honorary freeman of a London company for his services against the Jacobites, some wag said it would have to be the Butchers. The Duke's successes were recognised by his being voted an income of £40,000 per annum in addition to his revenue as a prince of the royal house. It was, in effect, blood money earned by war crimes.

While much of Cumberland's reputation rests on the immediate events surrounding Culloden, he was also a strong advocate and savage pursuer of the suppression of Highland culture. He left behind him the largest army of occupation ever seen in Britain in order to pacify the Highlands while permanent fortifications were built.

He contributed to a policy of cultural imperialism by disarming the Highlands, abolishing the wearing of Highland dress, suppressing certain surnames linked with the rebellion and seeking to extirpate Catholicism from the land. He even suggested transporting whole clans like the Camerons and MacPhersons to the colonies – a sort of ethnic cleansing.

By helping to destroy the social nexus of the clan that was at the heart of Highland society, he helped sever the bond between chiefs and

clanspeople that had been the basis of Highland society for centuries.

Lastly, by institutionalising the prejudice that the Highlanders were uncivilised, Cumberland also contributed to the racist views responsible for their later misfortunes.

Rab Houston is the editor of *The New Penguin History of Scotland: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Penguin, 2005)

## 1900–2000

### Oswald Mosley

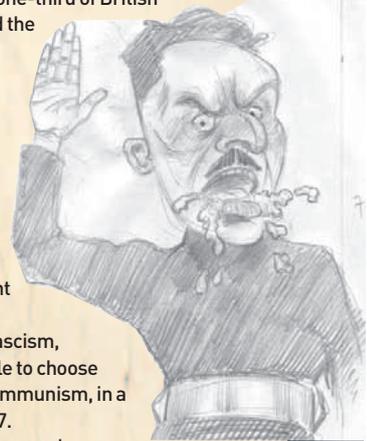
Nominated by Professor **Joanna Bourke** of the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology, Birkbeck College, London

**O**swald Mosley (1896–1980) was the founder of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1932. He remains an inspiration for far-right groups in Britain and thus continues to have a pernicious impact on our society. His authoritarian politics relied on anti-Semitism and anti-immigration, and the party's willingness to use violence was most notoriously exhibited at the Fascist rally at Olympia in 1934. His most evil act was inciting anti-Semitic feeling and in 1934, the BUF launched an anti-Semitic campaign in the East End of London, home to one-third of British Jews. He attacked the "big Jews" for threatening the economy and the "little Jews" for "swamping" British cultural identity. While he never succeeded in turning Britain Fascist, 70 per cent of respondents under 30 chose Fascism, when asked people to choose between it and Communism, in a Gallup Poll in 1937.

He was handsome and charming, and his early career – in the Conservative and then Labour Party – showed him to be a man of ideas and energy. In the early 1920s, his opposition to the "Old Men" who supervised the carnage of the First World War won him many supporters. However he was vain, megalomaniac, and had delusions of grandeur, although Attlee observed that his theatrical displays were routinely derided [at one meeting, when Mosley strode on stage with his arm uplifted, a voice called out, "Yes, Oswald dear, you may go to the lavatory"].

It would be difficult to find a more unpopular politician than Mosley in 1945: he was widely regarded as a traitor and a symbol of Fascism. On his death in 1980 his son Nicholas concluded that his father was a man whose "right hand dealt with grandiose ideas and glory" while his left hand "let the rat out of the sewer".

Joanna Bourke is the author of *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (Granta, 2000)



## 1800–1900

### Jack the Ripper

Nominated by Professor **Clive Emsley** of the Open University

**N**o-one can touch the serial killer Jack the Ripper for sheer wickedness during 19th-century Britain. Firstly, because he preyed on the most pathetic and vulnerable women in London's East End. Secondly, for the sheer horror of his brutal crimes.

During his murder spree in the autumn of 1888, Jack the Ripper definitely killed five prostitutes – and possibly a couple of other women too – in the most appalling and extreme circumstances. His victims were disembowelled, their intestines draped over their shoulders and their breasts cut off. This man was manifestly a savage brute and while he may have had mental problems – he must have had, to do what he did – they can't excuse his terrible actions.

The murders had huge repercussions at the time – and have of course influenced our view of serial killers ever since. For months after the Jack the Ripper murders women across the land, be it in Norwich or Newcastle, were terrified to go out at night. And while the press might have coined the name by which the world's most notorious serial killer is known, this does not detract from the savagery of his crimes.

The Ripper has become a villain – for all time – and his shadow extends to the present day. And the way in which the world responds to modern serial killers such as the Yorkshire Ripper is influenced by the way we responded to the most notorious serial killer of all, Jack the Ripper.

All sorts of people have been accused of being Jack the Ripper: the painter Walter Sickert; rogue royals; Freemasons, you name it – but it seems unlikely we'll ever know his true identity. However, this has just served to add to the mystique surrounding this most wicked of men.

*Hard Men: Violence in England since 1750* by Clive Emsley was published by Hambledon in 2005



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