

A Brief Historical Survey of Individualism in Britain

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Introduction

The British people are well-known for their firm belief in the 'inviolability' of the fundamental liberties of the individual under English law and the 'sacredness' of the individual. They have long given priority to the rights and privileges of the individual as against the wider group or the state. "An Englishman's house/home is his castle," and their basic personal rights are protected by common and statute law. They are allowed to do as they please as long as they do not infringe upon other people's rights and privacy.

Their respect for individualism is also seen in their orderly behaviour and willingness to form queues. The English, in the words of Demiashevich, believe firmly that "they have received the mission of bringing to mankind the blessing of orderly civic liberties and of morally and physically sane private life." (*The National Mind*, p.35)

They also have an ingrained distaste for uniforms and subordination, and so obey themselves and only what they recognize as fair and just, and not any despotism whatsoever. They refuse to be oppressed by potential mass murderers such as the authorities, though, now and then, they have had to obey against their will. To cite but a few, the Clarendon code (1661-65) forced some 2000 Anglican clergy who refused to comply to resign their livings and the Puritanistic Victorian morality urged on children unquestioning obedience to parents and on the lower classes a similar submission to those of higher status than themselves. By and large, however, encroachments on personal liberty and invasions of individual privacy have been and still are the last things that they would allow others to infringe upon them.

As for their way of living, even though the common people in England seem on the surface to be feeling happiest living in the bay-windowed, semi-

detached houses with formula floor plans and traditional features of a (false) fireplace, one sofa and two chairs, their life is not stereotyped at all. They have, on the contrary, their own tastes, and live with a sense of distance preserved towards their neighbours, for "A hedge between keeps friendship green." This sense of distance, an important factor of individualism and privacy, prevails in their everyday life, for example, between parents and children [in prosperous families children are sent to boarding schools] and even between a husband and wife who often carry on in public as if they have never met each other before. The distance is also kept when they address relative strangers. They, unlike Americans, prefer to use honorific or official titles to names.

It is true that they also set a high value on things such as the pub, the football match, the tea-party in the back garden, the fireside talk and nice cup of tea. These are communal in a sense but not official and they can enjoy even these occasions quite privately. They are also addicted to hobbies of personal tastes and individual styles such as gardening, amateur carpentry and walking, in which they can fully enjoy privacy and profound joys of solitude. As George Orwell comments in his essay *England Your England*, their life is full of 'privateness'.

Their preference for individualism is also seen in their free expression of their own opinions, their admiration of men and women of good character and their great interest in biography or minute history of self-made men, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

As far as the first appearance in English of the term 'individualism' is concerned, it seems to have been as late as 1835 when Ralph Waldo Emerson used the word in his essay. OED cites its first appearance in the same year as the English translation by Henry Reeve of De Tocqueville's *De la Democratie en Amerique*.

The term individualism, however, is not so clear in definition. The negative and pejorative interpretation of the word, which was predominant in the early stage of its appearance, gives it the meaning of 'self-centred feeling' or 'evil, antisocial impulses of self-interest', whereas the positive interpretation has it as 'the social theory which advocates the free and

independent action of the individual, as opposed to communistic methods of organization and state interference (OED)' stressing the supreme value of the individual who can and should be able to direct and realize his moral and justice life without restrictions from authority such as tradition, church or state.

Furthermore, as will be seen in this paper, we probably should say that the English individualism, deeply rooted in its liberalism, lies somewhere between the aforementioned individualism in a positive sense and charitable state/social intervention(ism) or collectivism, or in a supple compromise or balance between them. England is, by and large, a country of subtle network of compromises or harmony between reality and illusion, democracy and privileges, humbug and decency, hierarchy and independence, the ability to lose oneself in a collective action and the power to preserve a sound measure of individualism.

In this thesis we will try to see how such individualism started and developed in Britain.

Historical background

In general the origin of individualism in Europe may obscurely be traced back as early as ancient Epicurianism which, regarding the individuals as the driving force of social institutions and processes, rejected the influence of gods in human affairs and sought freedom from pain and emotional disturbances. The Judeo-Christian tradition also emphasised liberty and the worth of the individual, which could be endorsed by the following remarks:

“he (the Lord) hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and opening of the prison to them that are bound.” (Isaiah 61:1)

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32)

“Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; Whether

Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (1 Cor. 3:21-23)

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty." (Gal. 5:13)

The Celts, introducers of agriculture and moorland village communities to Britain, seem to have lived in rather tribal and hierarchial communities. But the Germanic peoples (the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes), the backbone of the English character and institutions, who invaded and settled in England as agriculturists, were originally mounted nomads and lovers of combat and rule. These fighting/warrior farmers seem to have lived at first as rough riders or soldiery. They were individualistic in their character, which seem to originate in their isolated dwellings, pastoral lives, trust in and reliance on leadership and in the isolation of farmsteads before they came to England. Such a life style must have made them self-centred and independent with little interest in interdependence. Even though individual anonymity, co-operation or social help and mutual sacrifice could have developed after they settled down in villages, the settlers' lively spirit of freedom and comradeship against the medley of races who came after them into England, nevertheless, must have helped individualism and sense of independence remain and enhanced.

The Germanic system of the Anglo-Saxons seems to have been one of absolute individual property and had no 'group' which owned the land, and therefore no idea that the link between the family and the resources were inextricable. Their society was a fairly democratic one led by aristocracy and ceorls, or the free farmers of free kindred and substantial householders, who became the key men in the agrarian organization of the Anglo-Saxon England. The Anglo-Saxon tribal institutions from continental days may have been broken apart during and after the migration by the perilous seacrossings and there were formed new, rather individualistic communities peculiar to England with land and property, if partially, privately owned.

The existence of private ownership in the early Middle Ages may also be

proven by the fact that the word and concept of 'thief' (the year of its first appearance cited in OED is 688) already existed at that time and the importance of individuals can be seen in the existence in the Anglo-Saxon Ages of the 'wergeld', the payment made on the death of a man by the slayer and the slayer's kindred. Wergeld was also paid when a man was disabled by the attacker.

Even in the Middle Ages when land was not purchased or even bequeathed by legacy but bestowed in trust and in return for services, there seems to have been a sense of ownership, though what was there in the ancient selfgoverning villages was for the most part communal ownership. In the 'open-field' system of the Middle Ages, private property in portions of land was inseparable from co-partnership in the whole. Viewed from another angle, each member of the village hierarchy was at once servant and master or owner.

The principle of collective responsibility that one should work for all and all for one thus gave the peasantry quite a firm and lasting peace between socialism and individualism, and the peasant society was in essence a cluster of free and localized democracies. We may, therefore, be safe to say here that the individualistic freedom and responsibility of the English people are, to some extent, based on the inherited and customary right to the land from early times.

As for the local business in the Anglo-Saxon village, it was dealt with on democratic lines by the 'moot' or a village meeting held in the church or in the open air. At the meeting, which it was a duty for all the inhabitants to attend, legal and administrative issues were decided in the presence of witnesses, and various village officials were appointed.

The Conquest in 1066 of the Anglo-Saxon England by William, Duke of Normandy, resulting in feudalism, superposed a lord upon an already working system and created a clearer-cut hierarchy with the peasants at the base of the feudal pyramid.

However, the change from an endogamous clan society based on status with homogeneous culture of multi-generation family to a society of nuclear families based on contract with much more individualistic sense of values

seems to have existed as early as the 13th century. By the beginning of the 13th century, ownership of land lay in the individual, not in any larger group, for although it had been thought to be, and in many cases had been, the English custom for estates to be inherited undivided by the eldest son [the custom of not inalienable but loose primogeniture, firmly interlinked with complete individual property in real estate, had been firmly established in England by the 13th century], private ownership of lands, as is seen above, seems to have existed from very early times, and at the end of the 12th century and in the early 13th century land was already frequently bought, sold and leased by villeins. The property rights and status of women also seem to have been extensively developed by the start of the 13th century.

The majority of ordinary people in England from at least the 13th century thus seems to have been rampant individualists, highly mobile both geographically and socially, economically 'rational', market-oriented and acquisitive, and ego-centred in kinship and social life.

Although most peasants subsumed under the class of unfree serfs in the 12th and 13th centuries, the serfdom disappeared in the 15th century after the Black Death (1348-68), which reduced the overall population by an estimated one-third and caused scarcity of labour and rise in wages, and the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, which, triggered by a variety of social and economic grievances of the peasants, notably against a series of oppressive poll tax, demanded the abolition of serfdom, fair rents and wages, and better government, though the risings were brought under control and the king's concessions, which had been made during the rebellion, were rescinded.

Soon after the Black Death, with some rich farmers increasing their holdings by taking over the fields of those who perished and others migrating quite frequently, most of the characteristics of a real peasantry seem to have disappeared. In the last years of the 14th century there seems to have been a clearly flourishing land market and by the 1450s the cohesive family unit seems to have transformed into atomic elements.

The wars during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) between England and France also gradually freed the peasants in return for their cooperation in them in terms of war expenses. John Wycliff (1320?-84), a religious

reformer and supervisor of the translation of the Bible from Latin into English, and John Ball (d. 1381), the spiritual leader of the Peasants' Revolt well-known for his remarks: "When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?" preached the ideal of a free community without riches or poverty and spiritually enlightened the peasants and helped them think about the importance and value of individuals.

As for legal protection of the individuals, the Saxon laws such as the law codes of Ine (King of Wessex: 688-726) and Alfred the Great (King of Wessex: 871-99) were replaced by the common law formulated by the royal courts as constituting the common custom of the realm. The common law, which began to grow under Henry II (r. 1154-89), remains one of the three primary sources of English law. [The other two sources are equity, the body of law established by judicial precedents to provide remedies for wrongs not covered by the common law, and legislation.]

The Magna Carta or the Great Charter, sealed by King John at Runnymede in 1215 after meeting the barons who were opposed to his disastrous foreign policy and arbitrary rule and determined to secure themselves against future infringements by the King of their liberties, put constitutional restraints on the royal power and guaranteed every free man security from illegal interference in his person or property and justice to everyone. We may argue here that the essence of the Magna Carta which can be seen in the following two clauses helped the people to increase not a little sense of personal liberty and individualism:

"No freeman shall be taken or imprisoned or disseised or outlawed or exiled or in any way destroyed, nor will we go upon him nor send upon him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land." (*Magna Carta* by D.I. Stroud. p.19)

"To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay, right or justice." (ibid.)

Another legal protection was given in 'habeas corpus,' a remedy of great

antiquity (regulated and strengthened by the Habeas Corpus Act in 1679). As early as the 13th century there appeared 'habeas corpus' (Latin: 'you (may) have the body'; the opening words of the Latin writ) which required anyone detaining an individual to produce him or her in court within a specified period and to furnish reasons for the detention, thus protecting individuals from being arbitrarily imprisoned. Habeas corpus, though suspended during the Jacobite rebellions (1715, 1745) and during the French Revolutionary war (1794), has been maintained to this day in its adjusted forms.

The further growth of a labour market with landless day labourers brought about by enclosures and other agrarian innovations in the 15th and 16th centuries, wider production and circulation of commodities, extensive use of money and the setting of prices to objects, and the separation of business affairs from family affairs, gradually put an end to the peasantry and signaled the start of a more individualistic capitalistic economy.

According to Italian visitors quoted in *The Origin of English Individualism*, England in the 15th and 16th centuries seems to have been already different in national character from other countries in Europe in that the people had their self-confidence, arrogance and mutual suspiciousness, and an individualistic, self-help, social system deeply rooted in their laws, customs and kinship system.

In the 16th century the well-fed yeoman, freeman or tenant farmer, was the typical rural figure regarded then, as the ceorls in the Anglo-Saxon days and the urban middle class in the 19th century, as the backbone of the nation of England. These yeomen of sturdy independence worked hard to put, by turning their growing wealth into social honour, their children one step higher up the social ladder into the class of the squire or the English country gentleman – the descendent, in an economic sense, of the medieval lord of the manor, and the ancestor of the landed aristocracy of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The easy social mobility from the bottom to the top of society (and not so strong polarization between nobles and peasants as opposed to the situation in France, for example,) in the Tudor Ages, or even from earlier times

onwards, must have considerably helped develop individuality.

The Dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII from 1536-40 which threw thousands of peasants out of the Abbey estates into beggary and the Enclosures, which, in the phrase of Sir Thomas More (1487-1535), 'ate men,' and triumphed in 1845, might also have helped people to become more individualistic, for, deprived of the protection by the Church or the monasteries, they had to live on their own.

Seen from a political point of view, people had already learned to combine self-discipline and self-government during the Tudor England: there were no standing army nor professional civil service and local justices were led by the squire or the English gentleman who acted as the unpaid Justice of Peace appointed by the Crown. The office had started in the 14th century and the JPs were given judicial powers in matters relating to the keeping of the peace in boroughs and counties.

In literature, the Renaissance, which brought about a new age of democracy and progress, played a big role in freeing the people from the restraints of medieval self-denial and feudalism, and in awakening people to the fearless desire for self-development and humanism. Although the passages before and after the first quotation are full of Hamlet's gloomy and pessimistic view of Man, the following passages from Shakespeare may very well illustrate the excitement, merriment and ambitions of the people or the '*joie de vivre*' of Renaissance England at that time:

"What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" (*Hamlet*, Act II. sc. ii. 307-12)

"O wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in't!" (*The Tempest*, Act V. sc. i. 182-185)

The self-reliance and self-possession of the people, especially the young

gentlemen of fortune as well as the diplomats, scholars, public servants and soldiers, must have also been fostered by their continental journey or the Grand Tour as was later to be known. A great number of young gentlemen were sent to the Continent, especially to Italy and France, in the hope that they will acquire a highly developed taste, polished manners, knowledge, and self-assurance. The tour was thus accepted in the 16th century as an invaluable alternative, or supplement, to a university education. In the 18th century, when English universities fell into great discredit, the continental tour became reputed as an important part of upper-class education. Among the tutors who accompanied the young gentlemen to the Continent were such distinguished scholars as Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. We may argue that this tendency of the rich English to send their children away from home for educational purposes is reflected in their later custom of sending their children to boarding schools.

In religious movements there was also seen a tendency towards individualism. The Reformation in the 16th century saw the Roman Catholic Church replaced by the Protestant Church with emphasis on individual religious exercises. In Protestantism, initiated by such religious reformers as Martin Luther (1483-1546), who rose against the sale of 'indulgences' by the Pardoners and the low examples and authoritative conducts of the Catholic Church, the Bible itself and the conscience of the individual were paid higher regard to than the priests or the Church. Protestantism, thus, in Carlyle's words became 'the grand root from which our whole consequent European History branches out.' (*On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. p.354)

The Puritanism (a Protestant movement in the 16th and 17th century inspired by European reformers such as French theologian John Calvin (1509-64) whose interpretation of the Bible regarded all members of the Church as equal under Christ), rejecting all trust in what they regarded as superstition and magical manipulation in the medieval Catholicism, stressed the idea of the individual's direct communication with God or living by the voice of God in the heart and the individual's rational legal acquisition by virtue of his own ability and initiative. Protestantism was thus fitted to

England because independent individuals had come to dislike the idea of a visible authoritarian head, which is manifested in their later adoption in the reign of the Joint Sovereigns of the constitutional monarchy in which 'The English sovereign reigns, but does not rule.'

Incidentally the Puritans, denouncing earthly pleasures such as dancing and acting as temptations of the Devil, mortified the senses and denied themselves the enjoyment of all the benefits of reality, and a statute in 1623 forbade Sunday amusements. Such was their strictness, gravity and stoicism in behaviour that one may argue that the Puritan spirit of English comfort is still strongly reflected in the national neglect of good food and wine.

After the Restoration in 1660, Puritans were subsumed into nonconformists, i.e., Protestants who do not conform to the teaching or practices of the Church of England or other established churches.

The possessive individualism grew in the middle of the 17th century in the work of political theorists such as Thomas Hobbs (1588-1679) and was later expressed by John Locke (1632-1704), the pioneer of empiricism or the view that experience, especially of the senses, is the only source of knowledge, who denied the divine right of kings in advocacy of the liberties of citizens.

After the Restoration, the Clarendon code (1661-65), a series of parliamentary measures aimed at reestablishing the position of the Anglican Church which included Acts of Uniformity and Corporation Act, brought into being the permanent religious and social estrangement between Anglicanism and Nonconformity by coercing the use of Protestant prayer books in Anglican worship and attendance at church, forcing 2000 clergy out of job, and excluding nonconformists from municipal offices. The Conventicle Act (1593) penalized those who declined to attend the Church of England services and attended conventicles – secret or illegal meetings for unauthorised worship, and the Test Act (1673) excluded nonconformists from civil and military office and consequently gave rise to further colonization by nonconformists, especially the Quakers, of North America.

These limitations, discriminations and persecutions imposed upon nonconformists were, however, gradually relaxed by the Toleration Act

(1689), occasional conformity with Anglicanism, annual indemnity acts since 1727, and the repeal of the Corporation Act in 1828. After the Toleration Act, the nonconformists became increasingly involved in humanitarian and philanthropic activities such as spiritual and moral education and social reforms, which were later shared by the Methodists who also emphasized individual salvation and the love of God.

The Bill of Rights (1689) after the Glorious Revolution (1688) laid down the principles of parliamentary supremacy and curtailed the royal prerogative by illegalising the suspending power (the right to suspend a statute) as well as the dispensing power (the right to exempt individuals from a particular law).

Although on the one hand the Industrial Revolution (from about 1760 to 1860), through its economic change from a domestic production to production in factories, broke up the traditional village life and exploited labour (from children and women to the old) in the factory, on the other it helped further individualism. The growing individualism of the business world in Victorian England, supported by nonconformists' inventiveness and enterprise as well as the religious and civil liberty, made life more individuals-centred and 'each one for himself' an accepted slogan, for "God helps those who help themselves."

The spiritual influence on the British people of the American Revolution (1775-83), which itself was not a little influenced by the spirit of the Magna Carta, the French Revolution (1789-99), and Britain's victory over France, the hereditary enemy, in the Napoleonic Wars (1804-15), may also have been innegligible.

The words of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) in the original draft of the Declaration of Independence:

"All men are created equal and independent,"

and the famous manifesto of Lord Nelson (1758-1805) issued during the famous Battle of Trafalgar in 1805:

“England expects every man will do his duty,”

must have, if indirectly, reinforced the Englishman’s sense of liberty and individualism. The following words of Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) must also have contributed to deepening English people’s sense of individualism:

“Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”
 (“Address at Gettysberg”, 19 Nov., 1863)

The economic and political liberalism was propounded by the philosophical radicals or the followers of the ideas of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) on legal, political, and social reform, which included James Mill (1773-1836), an exponent of utilitarianism and Bentham’s leading disciple, and Joseph Hume (1777-1855), a radical politician who worked hard to obtain Parliamentary recognition of the Trade Unions’ legality. The utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham based all values on utility or the usefulness of anything and stressed the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pains, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”, and usefulness of laws and institutions, though it must be pointed out that it was often unsympathetic and indifferent to individual suffering of the poor.

G.M. Trevelyan described the strongly individualist Protestant England in the early 19th century as follows:

“An individualist commercialism and an equally individualist type of religion combined to produce a breed of self-reliant and reliable men, good citizens in many respects – ‘Philistines’ in the phrase popularized by their most famous critic in a later generation.”
(*English Social History*, p.435)

Among the eminent social and political reformers at that time were Charles James Fox (1749-1806), champion of liberal causes, and Earl Grey (1764-1845), who as Prime Minister introduced the first Reform Act (1832) which marked the beginning of the extension of the franchise to

the British people.

John Stuart Mill (1806-73), son of James Mill, modifier of utilitarianism and early leader of the women emancipation movement, emphatically defended individual freedom in his *On Liberty* and said:

“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign,”
(John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government, p.73)

“The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it,” (ibid., p.75)

and

“The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it.” (ibid., p.170)

The effective reforming spirit of liberalism was inherited by such politicians as W.E. Gladstone (1809-98), Tory-turned Liberal prime minister whose government passed the third Reform Act (1884), and David Lloyd George (1863-1945), Liberal prime minister and the champion of people's rights, who helped lay the foundations of the welfare state. Chartism (1838-48), led first by William Lovett (1800-77) and Feargus O'Connor (1794-1855) and then by James Bronterre O'Brien (1805-64) and other demagogues, also worked hard, though rather veinly at that time, to promote radical political reforms, demanding annual parliaments, universal adult male suffrage, and so forth.

In the field of political economy, “*laissez-faire*” (French: let them act or leave things alone), a policy of non-interference by the government in economic affairs, has been a generally accepted and supported theory, though it may be accused of having enriched the few and sapped the vitality of the many by, for example, allowing lords to enclose people's lands and commons, and employers to exploit workers or monopolize the trade. Any attempt by

the state to regulate working conditions or trade has been, in theory at least, thought to be an unjustifiable interference with individual liberty. As Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), American thinker and essayist, put it, "That government is best which governs least." Underlying the 19th-century "*laissez-faire*" was the theory of Adam Smith (1723-90) that the individual working in his own interests leads ultimately to the greatest good of the state.

The reality is, however, that the English people have welcomed and benefited from a variety of reform acts such as the Factory Acts (1833-50) which improved the working conditions of factory workers, and the Mines Act (1842) which prohibited the employment underground of women, girls, and boys under the age of ten. These legislations were carried through parliament by the great efforts of the Victorian evangelical Christian and philanthropist Lord Shaftesbury (1801-85). This is again a wise compromise of the English people between ideal theory and reality.

The social reformist Samuel Smiles (1812-1904) also dominated the minds of the Victorians with his works inspired by utilitarianism. *Self-Help*, one of his masterpieces, which asserted that the humblest individual, if they work hard, could succeed, collected short biographies of many a successful man in a variety of walks in life and stressed as key spirits the following proverbs of "Heaven helps those who help themselves" and "With will one can do anything" and emphasized self-education/cultivation and self-realization. Among the men of self-help cited in this book are: Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95), potter and founder of Wedgwood ware, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), Scottish poet and historical novelist well-known for his *Ivanhoe*, and William Hogarth (1697-1764), painter and engraver, best-known for his series *A Rake's Progress* and *Marriage à la Mode*.

Incidentally the word 'self-help' is a coinage by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the Sage of Chelsea, an individualistic essayist and historian who said in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, "The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

Even now self-made men such as Sir Freddie Laker and Sir Clive Sinclair are greatly admired. The famous *Who's Who*, an annual reference book of contemporary biography, which has been published and enjoyed

popularity since 1849, and many other books in this genre testify to the English people's liking for the minute history of individuals. Biographies and autobiographies in Britain (both of which are of an ancient history but were developed and regularly practiced since the 17th century) thus have increased the readers' interest in and understanding of others as well as themselves.

The English people's individualism, far from selfish or self-seeking, can also be seen in the great number (currently over 170,000) of charitable organizations in Britain manned by voluntary workers. While there is a long history of individualism, there is also that of '*noblesse oblige*' (French: "nobility obligates" – the idea that persons of high birth or rank are responsible for benevolent and honorable behaviour) as long pedigrees of responsibilities.

The English people's deep-rooted desire to retire to a cottage in the country may also be cited as another supportive testimony to our interpretation that the English prefer individualism to collectivism.

Conclusion

As has been seen above, it is almost impossible to find a time when an Englishman did not believe in and exercise individual liberty and rights of his own.

From the very beginning of their history, even in their tribal and communal life, there was a budding of individualism. It was then gradually but steadily intensified by the decline of patriarchal clan society and communal peasant society (of barter subsistence economy based not on the individual but on the household of parents and children). The feudal society which followed eroded the liberty of the individual but a variety of legal codes such as the Magna Carta and Habeas Corpus Acts and individuals-oriented religions such as Puritanism advocated and strengthened the liberty and rights of the individual and the society also changed into a capitalistic and individualistic society of absolute ownership and economic isolation of the individual due to the destruction of manorial system, the development of labour market, agricultural and industrial revolutions, and so forth.

The English individualism, balancing itself between the positive individualism and charitable or state interventionism, will continue to be enjoyed in Britain.

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