

The trial of King Charles I - January 1649.

Characters

Narrator
John Bradshaw - President of the Court
Simon Moore - The Clerk to the Court
King Charles
Caroline Sweet - First spectator
Jane Davis - Second spectator
Gerald Baxter - Parliamentarian soldier
Francis Hale - Parliamentarian soldier
Veronica Maunders - Servant at Carisbrooke Castle

Non-speaking parts

Two guards
Up to twelve judges
Several soldiers
Several spectators

Act One. Scene 1. Westminster Hall.

The First Day: Saturday 20 January 1649

Everyone files slowly into the room

Clerk to the Court Will you all take your seats please. Soldiers down both sides of the hall. Spectators at the far end. Quickly now. Make way for John Bradshaw, the President of the Court, and the rest of the judges.

John Bradshaw *(striding through)* You're doing a fine job, my friend. Today is the most important day in the history of England. Today a king is to be tried for treason. In 300 years' time, people will read about this day and will praise us for what we have done.

Narrator Everyone took their rightful places and then silence fell. The story began in 1642, when King Charles and his Royalist army went to war with the Parliamentarian army. The Royalists lost the war and King Charles was sent to prison in Carisbrooke Castle. He started plotting with the Scots and tried to persuade them to invade England. There was a second civil war which the King also lost. Now it is January 1649, and King Charles is being tried for treason.

Clerk to the Court Bring the prisoner to the dock.
(Two guards appear, one on either side of the King. Slowly they lead him to the dock)

Caroline Sweet *(Leans over to her friend)*
Just look at him. He's so thin and sickly looking.

Jane Davis Serves him right! All the pain and torment he's caused us. I've lost my husband and two sons thanks to this war.

Caroline Sweet I know, but after all he is our King. He looks like a man who has suffered, doesn't he? Just look at his eyes. They look lost. I think he knows what is going to happen to him.

Jane Davis A fair trial and a fair result. That's what will happen to him. He'll go to the block and none deserves it more than him!

Clerk to the Court	Silence in court.
Narrator	Everyone turned to look at President Bradshaw. He had a piece of paper in his hand. He looked straight at King Charles and began to read:
John Bradshaw	Charles Stuart, King of England, Scotland and Wales, trusted to use your power for the good of the people; you stand accused of overthrowing the rights and freedom of the people, taking away the power of Parliament, and making war against Parliament and the people. How do you plead? Innocent or guilty?
King Charles	I refuse to answer to these charges. Neither you (<i>pointing at Bradshaw</i>) nor anyone else in this room has any legal right to put me on trial.
Narrator	After this, there was an uproar. Spectators started shouting and Bradshaw turned to consult the judges on either side of him. Eventually the Clerk to the Court spoke.
Clerk to the Court	I call this session to an end. We will meet again on Monday at the same time.

Scene 2. Westminster Hall.

The Second Day: Monday 22 January 1649

Narrator	The day began just as Saturday had, with Bradshaw speaking. King Charles was even more angry.
John Bradshaw	Charles Stuart, you are guilty of all the treasons, murders, burnings, damages and mischiefs to this nation committed in the wars. How do you plead?
King Charles	Parliament is not a court of law.
John Bradshaw	Confess or deny the charge.
King Charles	By what authority do you sit?
John Bradshaw	Take him away. (<i>The two guards lead the King out of the courtroom</i>)

Scene 3. Westminster Hall.

Witnesses are called

Narrator	The same thing happened on the third day of the trial. After this, the judges banned Charles from coming to the court. They began calling witnesses to accuse Charles of various crimes.
Clerk to the Court	I call Gerald Baxter to bear witness to the court.
John Bradshaw	And what have you got to say?

Gerald Baxter	<i>(stammering)</i> I was there, Sir, on that dreadful day in August 1642. King Charles, Sir, he was dead set on war. We tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen. He raised his standard at Nottingham and started the whole sorry business.
John Bradshaw	Thank you for your honourable testimony. Now who have we next? Ah yes, Francis Hale. What have you got to tell us? <i>(Francis Hale is led forward)</i>
Francis Hale	I started the war siding with the King, your Honour. But then I got sickened by the way he treated prisoners after we'd captured Leicester. Why, I swear by God's own holy breath that he said 'I do not care if they cut them three times more, for they are mine enemies!'
Narrator	There were horrified murmurs from the spectators. Even Bradshaw looked shocked. The Clerk to the Court called the final witness.
Clerk to the Court	I call the final witness for the prosecution. Veronica Maunders.
Veronica Maunders	<i>(producing a crumpled piece of paper in her hand)</i> Your 'ighness, I swear I am only a poor servant at Carisbrooke Castle but I knows an evil man when I sees one! When Charles was prisoner in the castle, he asked me to deliver this letter secretly. I knew it was wrong. Not that I can read, you understand. But I took it straight to my husband who told me to take it to the Justice.
Narrator	The letter was read out to the court. It showed that while Charles had supposedly been trying to make peace with Parliament, he was secretly asking his son to raise another army to fight again.

Scene 4. Westminster Hall.

Verdict and sentence: Saturday 27 January 1649

Narrator	On 27 January, the court sat again and Charles was brought before the judges for the verdict and sentence. Charles was promised he could make a speech before the verdict was read out.
King Charles	Mr President, I want to talk to my people. Let me speak to the House of Commons and the House of Lords. I have a plan for peace.
John Bradshaw	You had time enough to speak to the Commons and Lords before the war. But you chose to close Parliament down. I forbid you to

Speak to them now.

King Charles

If you won't let me speak to the Commons and the Lords, at least let me speak to all the people gathered in here.

John Bradshaw

You refused to answer our charges at the beginning of the trial. You have lost your opportunity now. It is too late. This is the sentence that the court has passed upon you. Charles Stuart, King of England, Scotland and Wales, you are guilty of failing in your duty to see that parliaments were called. You have attacked the basic liberties of this country. Therefore ... this court does judge that Charles Stuart, a tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy of the people, shall be put to death by the severing of his head from his body.
(There is a huge gasp from the people in the courtroom, then a deathly hush)

Narrator

The execution was fixed for 30 January. The death warrant still had to be signed. In the end less than half of the original 132 judges signed it. The others refused.

Act Two. Scene 1. The Scaffold at Whitehall.

(Crowds are milling around the scaffold, where there is an axeman's block and two guards, one with an axe in his hand)

Narrator

On the morning of 30 January Charles rose early. He asked for two shirts since it was cold and he did not want to appear to be shivering from fear. He was then taken to Whitehall, where he ate a piece of bread and drank some wine and then prayed. At two o'clock he stepped on to the scaffold.

(King Charles is led into the room. He walks up to the block, kneels down and the executioner slowly raises his axe. As the axe falls [careful here!] the crowd groans, cries, moans and shouts. They all rush forward to surround the body)

Narrator

The souvenir hunters rushed to dip their handkerchiefs in the dead king's blood and to take hairs from his head and beard. Then the soldiers came charging in to force the crowd to leave. Everyone ran for their lives. The next day, King Charles's head was sewn back on to his body. A few days later, the body was quietly buried at Windsor Castle.