

Extract of Historical Timeline of Britain

3 September 1939

Britain declares war on Germany in response to the invasion of Poland

On 1 September, German forces invaded Poland. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain still hoped to avoid declaring war on Germany, but a threatened revolt in the cabinet and strong public feeling that Hitler should be confronted forced him to honour the Anglo-Polish Treaty. Britain was at war with Germany for the second time in 25 years.

9 April 1940

Germany mounts surprise invasions of Norway and Denmark

Germany invaded neighbouring Denmark on 7 April, and the Danes surrendered after two days. Denmark provided a land route to neutral Norway, which was invaded on 9 April. The small Norwegian army mounted fierce resistance, with the help of 12,000 British and French troops. The campaign in Norway ended when the German invasion of France and the Low Countries changed the focus of the war. The Allies were forced to evacuate.

10 May 1940

Winston Churchill becomes prime minister of the coalition government

Following the disastrous Norwegian campaign, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain faced heavy criticism at home. By early May, Chamberlain had lost the confidence of the House of Commons. Labour ministers refused to serve in a national coalition with Chamberlain as leader, so he resigned. Churchill became prime minister on 10 May, the same day Germany invaded Holland and Belgium.

26 May 1940

Thousands of Allied troops are evacuated from Dunkirk, France

Allied forces were utterly overwhelmed by the German 'blitzkrieg' in France. Thousands of soldiers were trapped in a shrinking pocket of territory centred around the French seaside town of Dunkirk. The Royal Navy's Operation Dynamo succeeded in evacuating approximately 338,000 British and French troops in destroyers and hundreds of 'little ships' - volunteers who sailed to France in their own vessels - over a period of ten days, while under constant attack from the Luftwaffe (German air force).

30 June 1940

German forces occupy the Channel Islands

Britain had taken the decision not to defend the Channel Islands in the event of a German invasion. As German forces overran France in June 1940, about 30,000 people were evacuated from the islands, with about twice that number choosing to remain. Jersey and Guernsey were bombed on 28 June with the loss of 44 lives. The German occupation began two days later. The Channel Islands were the only part of the British Isles to be occupied during the war.

3 July 1940

French fleet in North Africa is destroyed by the Royal Navy

The attack on the French fleet at the Algerian port of Mers-el-Kébir left almost 1,300 Frenchmen dead and the fleet immobilised. Prime Minister Winston Churchill personally ordered the fleet destroyed if it refused to fight alongside British, following France's capitulation to the Germans. Despite the cost in lives, Churchill could not allow the fleet to become a threat to British naval dominance in the Mediterranean.

13 August 1940

Battle of Britain begins with heavy raids by the German Luftwaffe

In July 1940, German leader Adolf Hitler ordered preparations for Operation Sealion - the invasion of Britain. The Luftwaffe (German air force) first had to destroy the Royal Air Force. Vastly outnumbered, the RAF nonetheless consistently inflicted heavy losses on the German squadrons, thanks to excellent aircraft, determined pilots and radar technology. On 17 September, two days after the Luftwaffe sustained its heaviest single day of losses, Hitler postponed the invasion.

2 September 1940

'Destroyers for bases' agreement gives Britain 50 US destroyers

In September 1940, US President Franklin Roosevelt signed an agreement to give Britain 50 obsolete American destroyers in exchange for the use of naval and air bases in eight British possessions. The lease was guaranteed for the duration of 99 years 'free from all rent and charges'. Nonetheless, the US showed no sign yet of entering the war on the Allied side, as many in Britain hoped they would.

7 September 1940

'Blitz' begins with a massive daylight raid by the Luftwaffe

German bombing raids had already targeted Liverpool and Birmingham during August, but on 7 September the 'Blitz' intensified as 950 aircraft attacked London. It was the start of 57 consecutive nights of heavy bombing. The raid caused some 300 civilian deaths and a further 1,300 serious injuries. By the end of the Blitz, around 30,000 Londoners had been killed with another 50,000 injured.

15 April 1941

1,000 people are killed in the Belfast Blitz

No city, save London, suffered more loss of life in one night raid than Belfast, after 180 German bombers attacked the city. At the height of the raid an appeal was sent to the Irish leader Éamon De Valera, who sent fire engines to help fight the fires raging in the city.

20 May 1941

German troops invade Crete, driving the Allies out of the Eastern Mediterranean

German and Italian troops had overrun Greece in three weeks, starting on 6 April. Commonwealth troops were rushed there from Egypt to help the Greek resistance, but had to be evacuated. Many were sent to Crete in an effort to prevent the Axis powers dominating the eastern Mediterranean. Crete was attacked by the Germans on 20 May, and the Allied forces there were defeated and evacuated by the end of the month.

24 May 1941

HMS 'Hood' sunk by the German battleship 'Bismarck'

The British battlecruiser 'Hood' was sunk during the Battle of Denmark Strait, probably by a single shell from the German battleship 'Bismarck'. The ship sank so quickly that only three of the 1,418 man crew survived. 'Hood' was a well-known symbol of British imperial power and its loss was a significant psychological blow to Britain. The 'Bismarck' was itself sunk by the Royal Navy on 27 May 1941.

12 August 1941

Anglo-American alliance is sealed with the Atlantic Charter

The Atlantic Charter, agreed by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin Roosevelt, set out the principles that would shape the struggle against German aggression. It was drawn up during a secret meeting aboard the USS 'Augusta', off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada. The charter was supported by 26 countries, including the Soviet

Union, and after the war formed the basis of the United Nations Declaration. America entered the war four months later.

26 January 1942

First American troops arrive in Europe, landing in Belfast

America entered the war on the Allied side in December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and subsequent German declaration of war on the United States. Millions of men and thousands of planes and tanks were deployed to Britain, which became a base for American airmen flying bombing raids over Europe, a staging post for American troops on their way to fight in North Africa, and crucially the launching point for the D-Day invasions that began the liberation of Western Europe.

15 February 1942

British colony of Singapore surrenders to Japanese forces

This catastrophic defeat was a fatal blow to British prestige and signalled the fall of the empire in the Far East. The Japanese unexpectedly attacked down the Malay Peninsula instead of from the sea, where Singapore's defences were concentrated. About 70,000 men were taken prisoner, many of whom would not survive the war due to the brutal conditions of their incarceration.

11 March 1942

Sir Stafford Cripps goes to India to offer post-war self-government

Sir Richard Stafford Cripps was sent to India in March 1942 to win the co-operation of Indian political groups. The Japanese had occupied Burma, and were at the border of India. Stafford Cripps effectively offered post-war independence, which Mohandas Gandhi described as a 'post-dated cheque on a crashing bank'. The Indian National Congress insisted on immediate independence, which Stafford Cripps refused. Gandhi launched a last civil disobedience campaign, for which he was imprisoned.

30 May 1942

Start of the RAF's 'thousand bomber raids' on German cities

Air Marshall Arthur Harris took command of the Royal Air Force's bomber force in February 1942. He wanted to demonstrate the effectiveness of Bomber Command with massive, concentrated raids ('area bombing') on key German cities. The first 'thousand bomber raid' was on Cologne, with a second, two nights later, on Essen. A third raid, this time on Bremen, took place on 25 June. The raids caused massive destruction, particularly in Cologne.

19 August 1942

'Dieppe Raid' ends in disaster for the Allies

The Allied attack on the German-occupied port of Dieppe, on the northern French coast, had a variety of purposes. It would raise morale at a time when the war was going badly, it would show the Soviets that the western Allies could open a second front, and it would teach valuable lessons for the eventual full-scale invasion of Europe. It was a disaster. Of the 6,000 mainly Canadian troops who made it ashore, more than 4,000 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

23 October - 4 November 1942

Decisive British victory over German forces at Battle of El Alamein, Egypt

General Claude Auchinleck had stopped the Axis forces (mainly German and Italian troops) during the First Battle of El Alamein in early July 1942, but the Allied position was still precarious. When General Bernard Montgomery took command of 8th Army, he built up its strength to a level of superiority before smashing the Axis forces in a carefully coordinated assault, driving them all the way back to Tunisia. By May 1943, the Axis had been completely cleared out of North Africa.

November 1942

'Beveridge Report' lays the foundations for the Welfare State

Sir William Beveridge's report gave a summary of principles aimed at banishing poverty from Britain, including a system of social security that would be operated by the government, and would come into effect when war ended. Beveridge argued that the war gave Britain a unique opportunity to make revolutionary changes. Beveridge's recommendations for the creation of a Welfare State were implemented by Clement Attlee after the war, including the creation of the National Health Service in 1948.

13 May 1943

Axis siege of the island of Malta is lifted

Malta's position in the Mediterranean made it strategically vital for the Allies. It was effectively under siege from 1940 and suffered devastating Axis (Italian and German) bombing. From January to July 1942 there was only one 24-hour period when no bombs fell on the island. In summer 1942, George VI awarded the island of Malta the George Cross in acknowledgement of the bravery of its inhabitants. The siege was finally lifted when Axis forces capitulated in North Africa on 13 May 1943, .

16 May 1943

'Dambusters Raid' by the RAF breaches two dams in the Ruhr valley

This Royal Air Force raid by 19 Lancaster's utilised a 'bouncing bomb', developed by British scientist Barnes Wallis, in an attempt to destroy three major dams supplying water and power to the important German industrial region of the Ruhr. Two of the dams were breached, but 53 of the 133 aircrew were killed. Severe flooding killed over 1,000 people, but the damage to the Ruhr's industrial capability was relatively minor. Nonetheless, the raids were a major propaganda victory.

23 May 1943

Germany calls off the Battle of the Atlantic

Allied merchant shipping losses to German 'U-boats' in the Atlantic had reached crisis levels in late 1942 to early 1943. At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, Allied leaders allocated more resources to the battle. In March 1943, after a 'blackout' of several months, German U-boat ciphers were once again broken, allowing the new resources to be deployed to devastating effect. By May 1943, U-boat losses were so heavy that Kriegsmarine commander Admiral Karl Dönitz called off the battle.

10 July 1943

First Allied troops land in Europe as invasion of Sicily begins

When British and American troops landed on the south eastern tip of Sicily, it was the first significant Allied landing on European soil in two years. After a prolonged battle, Axis forces started withdrawing from the island on 11 August. The island of Sicily gave the Allies a foothold for the invasion of mainland Italy, which began in September.

18 May 1944

Allies win the Battle of Monte Cassino after five months of fighting

The battle centred on the ancient Italian monastery of Monte Cassino. The Allies were attempting to break through the German 'Gustav Line', which ran across Italy, south of Rome. The Germans sought to halt the Allied advance north by holding them at Monte Cassino. The bitter fighting lasted over five months, during which the monastery was reduced to rubble. By the time the Allies broke through, casualties numbered more than 54,000 Allied and 20,000 German troops.

6 June 1944

Allied forces land in Normandy on D-Day, starting the liberation of France

The invasion of Europe - the largest amphibious invasion in history - succeeded in landing 150,000 troops on the beaches of Normandy on the first day, through a massive combined operation requiring hundreds of ships and total air superiority. Behind the lines, Allied paratroops seized key strategic targets, while the French resistance sabotaged rail and communication links. By the end of D-Day, five beachheads were secured, and the Allies had a foothold in France.

22 June 1944

Allies defeat the Japanese at the battles of Imphal and Kohima

Since the start of the Burma campaign in 1941, Allied forces had done little but retreat to the point that Japanese forces stood ready to invade north east India. When the command of 14th Army passed to Lieutenant General William Slim, he imbued it with a new fighting spirit and developed a strategy of air support that allowed besieged positions to hold out against Japanese assault. He used Kohima and Imphal to break the Japanese in Burma and by June 1945, 14th Army had retaken Rangoon.

25 September 1944

Allied forces are defeated at the Battle of Arnhem

Operation Market Garden was a bold plan to land 30,000 Allied troops behind enemy lines and capture eight bridges spanning a network of waterways on the Dutch-German border near Arnhem. It would allow the Allies to outflank German border defences, opening the way for an advance into Germany and an early end to the war. A combination of factors, including faulty intelligence about German strength and bad weather, resulted in failure. More than 1,130 Allied troops were killed and 6,000 captured.

4 February 1945

Allied leaders shape the post-war world at the Yalta Conference

The war leaders agreed that Germany should be forced to surrender unconditionally and would be divided into four zones between Britain, the Soviet Union, France and the United States. It was also agreed that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan after Germany was defeated.

15 April 1945

British troops liberate the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, Germany

The liberation of Bergen-Belsen brought the horrors of Nazi genocide home to the British public when film and photographs of the camp appeared in British newspapers and cinemas. Conditions at Bergen-Belsen were so desperate that more than 10,000 prisoners died in the weeks after the liberation of the camp, despite the best efforts of the Allies to keep them alive. Millions were murdered to satisfy Nazi theories about racial-biological purity, at least six million of whom were Jews.

8 May 1945

Britain celebrates the end of war on Victory in Europe Day

German forces had been utterly defeated by the end of April 1945. Adolf Hitler committed suicide on 30 April as Soviet forces closed in on his Berlin bunker. The German Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz surrendered to Allied General Dwight Eisenhower in France on 7 May. The following day was officially celebrated in Britain as Victory in Europe Day. The entire country came to a standstill as people celebrated the end of war.

26 July 1945

Labour wins the general election by a landslide

On 23 May the wartime coalition government ended. Winston Churchill headed a temporary Conservative government until the July general elections, which Labour won with a majority of 146. Returning soldiers wanted social reforms and had rejected the 'war leader' Churchill in favour of Labour's Clement Attlee. The post-war years saw the implementation of many of the reforms recommended by Sir William Beveridge in 1942, and the creation of the Welfare State.

24 October 1945

United Nations comes into existence with Britain as a founder member

At the Yalta Conference in early 1945, the 'Big Three' of Britain's Winston Churchill, US President Franklin D Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin agreed to establish a new global organisation - the United Nations. The structure and charter of the organisation were established at another conference in San Francisco. Britain became one of the five 'security council' members, with a power of veto. On 24 October, the UN officially came into existence when its members ratified its charter.

15 August 1947

India gains independence from Britain

India was regarded as the most valuable British imperial possession. World War Two forced Britain to realise that it could not maintain a global empire and the British agreed to Indian self-government. However, they could not find a political solution that was acceptable to both Hindus and Muslims, and the country was partitioned into India and Pakistan. The British were unable to prevent the resulting inter-communal violence which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths.

22 June 1948

Post-war immigration from the Commonwealth begins

The liner 'SS Empire Windrush' docked at Tilbury carrying nearly 500 Caribbean immigrants to Britain, many attracted by offers of work. This arrival represented the beginning of significant immigration to Britain from the Commonwealth, particularly the Caribbean, and later the Indian subcontinent.

25 July 1948

Berlin Airlift begins after Soviet forces blockade the city

In June 1948, the Soviet Union began a blockade of Berlin, which had been divided into occupation zones by the victorious Allies at the end of the war. They hoped to drive the western Allies out of Berlin. The following month, British and American aircraft began to airlift supplies to West Berliners. In total, there were more than 277,000 flights to deliver

18 April 1949

Republic of Ireland comes into being

The Republic of Ireland Act (1948) came into force on Easter Monday, April 1949, ending vestigial British authority in Eire. Under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the British crown had retained some authority in the Irish Free State, although this was limited by the 1937 constitution. The 1948 Act repealed the External Relations Act and took Eire out of the Commonwealth.

8 June 1949

George Orwell's novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' is published

Orwell's novel was a bleak political account of the future, in which big government had created a destructive totalitarianism which denied both human values and the truth. The

novel made a major impact - such that it contributed the phrase 'Big Brother' to the language - and was seen as an attack on the Soviet Union.

29 August 1950

British troops arrive to support US forces in the Korean War

British troops were sent to help the US-led United Nations force repel the Communist invasion of South Korea by North Korea. The conflict set the pattern for the Cold War, with South Korea backed by the US and its allies, and North Korea backed by the Soviet Union and China. An armistice was agreed in July 1953 and Korea was partitioned. Approximately two million Korean civilians, 1.5 million Communist troops and 450,000 UN and South Korean troops were killed. No peace treaty was ever agreed.

23 October 1951

Conservatives under Winston Churchill win the general election

The Labour government fell as the Conservatives won a clear majority. Remarkably, Winston Churchill became prime minister again at the age of 76. He focused on foreign affairs, including reducing escalating Cold War tensions and maintaining the 'special relationship' with America, which he had done so much to develop during World War Two. Other foreign concerns included the Malayan emergency and the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya.

5 April 1955

Winston Churchill retires as prime minister

Winston Churchill was by now 80 and his health was declining. He was succeeded as prime minister by Anthony Eden, who had also served as Churchill's Foreign Secretary and was widely recognised as his 'heir apparent'.

11 February 1956

'Cambridge spies' surface in Moscow after disappearing in 1951

Two British diplomats, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, were among five men recruited by the Soviet secret service, the KGB, at Cambridge University in the 1930s. The others were Harold (Kim) Philby, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross. All had been involved in passing to the Soviets highly damaging military information, and the identities of British agents. Burgess and Maclean, who had fled Britain five years before, suddenly reappeared in the Soviet Union where they denied being spies.

5 November 1956

Britain and France invade Egypt after nationalisation of the Suez Canal

The Suez Crisis was sparked when Britain and France, allied with Israel, invaded Egypt over its decision to nationalise the Suez Canal - a vital waterway connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. Under American pressure, the canal was handed back to Egypt and the invasion force was withdrawn. The crisis revealed Britain's declining world status and its subordination to the US.

6 March 1957

Ghana becomes the first British colony in Africa to gain independence

The British colony of Gold Coast gained its independence, with Kwame Nkrumah as its first leader, following election victories for Nkrumah's nationalist Convention People's Party (CPP). The country was renamed Ghana in the declaration of independence. This event marked the beginning of rapid decolonisation in Africa.

15 May 1957

Britain tests its first hydrogen bomb

Following tests over Christmas Island in the Pacific Ocean, the government announced that Britain had joined the Soviet Union and the US as a nuclear power, with its own hydrogen bomb. The tests led to a debate in Britain about the dangers of nuclear weapons, and to the foundation in 1958 of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

14 January 1963

France vetoes Britain's entry to the European Common Market

President of France Charles de Gaulle announced the French veto on Britain's application to join the European Common Market, the forerunner of the European Union. De Gaulle said the British government lacked 'commitment' to European integration.

8 November 1965

Death penalty is abolished

The abolition of the death penalty for murder - one of the few remaining crimes for which capital punishment could still be handed down - effectively meant the final abolition of the death penalty. This was a major symbolic act in the reduction of the power of the state. The death sentence for treason and piracy with violence remained on the statute books until 1998 when they were abolished by the Crime and Disorder Act.

6 February 1971

First British soldier is killed in Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'

The first British soldier, Gunner Robert Curtis (aged 20), was killed in Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' by the self-styled 'Irish Republican Army' (IRA). He was shot while on foot patrol in North Belfast. British troops had been sent to Northern Ireland in 1969 in a 'limited operation' to restore law and order.

30 January 1972

British army kills 14 in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on Bloody Sunday

British troops opened fire on a crowd of civil rights protestors in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, killing 13 civilians and injuring a further 17. The crowd of between 7,000 and 10,000 people had been marching in protest at the policy of detention without trial. The sequence of events on 'Bloody Sunday' remains highly controversial, with accusations that senior IRA figures were present on the day and shot at British troops.

September 1976

Britain is forced to borrow money from the International Monetary Fund

A crisis in sterling forced the Labour government to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), making Britain the first major Western state to be forced into this humiliating course of action. In return for the loan, the IMF demanded cuts in government spending. After a political battle within the British government, the IMF terms were accepted and imposed in December.

Winter 1978/79

Strikes paralyse Britain during the so-called 'Winter of Discontent'

Industrial action by petrol tanker and lorry drivers was followed by hospital ancillary staff, ambulance men and dustmen going on strike. Hospitals were picketed, the dead left unburied, and troops called in to control rats swarming around heaps of uncollected rubbish. The large number of simultaneous strikes, the violence and perceived mean-mindedness of the picketing (which included the turning away of ambulances) created a sense of alarm in the electorate about the decline of British society.

27 August 1979

IRA kill the Queen's cousin Lord Mountbatten

Elizabeth II's cousin, Lord Louis Mountbatten, one of his teenage grandsons and two others were killed by a bomb on his boat at Mullaghmore in county Sligo, Ireland. On the same day the IRA also killed 18 soldiers at Warrenpoint in County Down.

11 April 1981

Racial tensions spark riots in Brixton and other areas

Serious rioting in Brixton following the arrest of a local black man marked the start of violent unrest across England. In London's Southall, Toxteth in Liverpool, Moss Side in Manchester, and to a lesser extent other centres such as Derby, crowds rioted, looted, and fought the police. Many of the riots reflected specific local problems, especially poor relations between predominantly black communities and the police.

3 October 1981

Hunger strike by Republican prisoners ends after ten deaths

Republican prisoners at the Maze prison near Belfast had begun their hunger strike over the right to be treated as political prisoners rather than criminals. A first strike, begun in late 1980, was called off with no deaths. But failure to secure concessions resulted in a second, led by Bobby Sands. It began in March 1981. The British government refused to concede. Ten men, including Sands, starved themselves to death, while 61 people were killed outside the prison in related violence.

2 April 1982

Argentina invades the British territory of the Falkland Islands

Three days after the invasion, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sent a naval task force to liberate the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic. The subsequent conflict cost the lives of 655 Argentine and 255 British servicemen, many of them sailors who died during attacks on Royal Navy warships. The conflict ended on 14 June when the commander of the Argentine garrison at Port Stanley surrendered to British troops.

12 October 1984

IRA bombers strike at the Conservative conference in Brighton

The bombing by Irish Republican Army terrorists of the Grand Hotel Brighton during the Conservative Party conference killed five and left more than 30 injured. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher narrowly escaped the blast. It was the closest the IRA had come to killing a British prime minister.

31 March 1990

Introduction of new local taxes sparks 'poll tax' riots in London

The Conservative plans for a 'poll tax', introduced in England and Wales on 1 April 1990, provoked vocal opposition across Britain in the form of anti-poll tax rallies and acts of civil disobedience. A largely peaceful march in London, attended by 70,000 people, degenerated into serious rioting centred on Trafalgar Square. The unpopularity of the tax contributed to

the downfall of Margaret Thatcher. Her successor John Major replaced the poll tax with the council tax.

17 January 1991

Liberation of Kuwait begins as Allies launch Operation Desert Storm

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and refused to withdraw. Following a massive military build up, US-led forces backed by a United Nations mandate launched 'Operation Desert Storm' to liberate Kuwait. A huge aerial bombardment preceded the ground attack on 24 February. The Iraqi army fell into headlong retreat and on 27 February, US President George Bush declared that Kuwait had been liberated. Saddam Hussein remained in power in Iraq.

1 July 1997

Britain hands Hong Kong back to China

After more than 150 years of British rule, Hong Kong was returned to Chinese control. Britain had held the New Territories north of Hong Kong under a 99-year lease that expired in 1997, requiring the 'handing back' of the colony to China. Under the 'One Country, Two Systems' policy, Hong Kong retained its own legal system, currency, customs policy and immigration laws for a minimum 50 years after the handover.

31 August 1997

Diana, Princess of Wales, dies in a car crash in Paris

Diana was the ex-wife of the heir to the British throne, Charles, Prince of Wales. A controversial figure in life, Diana's death in a car crash in Paris provoked widespread public mourning. On 6 September, one million people lined the streets of London for her funeral. It was later discovered that the driver of the car in which she, Diana and her friend Dodi Al Fayed were killed had more than the legal limit of alcohol in his blood and was travelling at over 100mph.

10 April 1998

Good Friday Agreement establishes a devolved Northern Irish assembly

An agreement between Northern Ireland's nationalists and unionists was reached after 30 years of conflict, as a result British government negotiations and US pressure on Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army. It set out plans for devolved government and provided for the early release of terrorist prisoners and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. Referenda in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland endorsed the agreement on 22 May. The assembly met on 1 July.

2000 UK forces intervene in Sierra Leone to protect and evacuate foreign citizens caught up in the civil war. They subsequently stay on to help train the government army.

2000 - 2001 - Libyan intelligence agent Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed Al Megrahi is found guilty of the 1988 Lockerbie bombing and sentenced at a court in the Netherlands to life in prison which he will serve in Scotland. His co-accused is found not guilty.

11 September 2001

Islamic terrorists crash aircraft on targets in New York and Washington

Nineteen mainly Saudi Arabian terrorists used hijacked planes to destroy the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and part of the Pentagon building in Washington. A fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania, killing all on board. Among the approximately 3,000 people killed in the attacks were 67 Britons. In response, US President George W Bush declared a worldwide 'war on terror'.

7 October 2001

Britain joins the US in strikes on Taleban-controlled Afghanistan

British forces contributed to the initial US military strikes against the Islamic fundamentalist Taleban regime in Afghanistan - the first retaliation to the terrorist attacks of '9/11'. The Taleban, who had allowed the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base, was overthrown and replaced with a US-backed administration. Coalition forces, including British troops, remain in Afghanistan. Osama Bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader responsible for the '9/11' attacks, was not found.

2001 September/November - Following September 11 attacks on targets in the US, PM Tony Blair offers strong support for US-led campaign against international terrorism. British forces take part in air strikes on targets in Afghanistan.

Britain joins the US in an invasion of Iraq

Despite significant opposition at home, the British government gave military support to the controversial United States-led invasion of Iraq. Crucially, the action was not backed by a United Nations mandate, sparking debate over the legality of the invasion. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was overthrown and captured. Iraq now has a democratically elected government, but the country remains deeply unstable as a result of the deliberate stoking of sectarian tensions by terrorist groups.

1 May 2004

Ten new states join the European Union

Ten new states from eastern and southern Europe joined the European Union, making it the largest trading bloc in the world by population. Their inclusion sparked fears, stoked by lurid media stories, of a huge influx of 'economic migrants' from the poorer eastern countries to the wealthier western countries such as Britain.

7 July 2005

Suicide bombers kill 52 people on London's transport system

Three men blew themselves up on London Underground trains, while a fourth exploded his bomb on a double-decker bus. Fifty two people were killed and more than 700 injured. On 21 July there were four more attempted suicide bombings in London, but none of the devices exploded. Islamic terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility, but it is thought that the bombers, all British Muslims, acted alone.

London bombings

2005 7 July - 52 people are killed and around 700 are injured in four suicide bomb attacks on London's transport network. Two weeks later, would-be bombers fail to detonate four devices on London's transport network.

July attacks

2005 July: Suicide bombers killed 52 people, injured hundreds

2005 28 July - Irish Republican Army (IRA) announces a formal end to its armed campaign.

2006 August - Police say they have thwarted an alleged plot to bring down as many as 10 planes travelling from the UK to the US.

2006 November - Former Russian security service officer Aleksandr Litvinenko, an outspoken critic of the Kremlin living in exile in London, dies there after being poisoned by a radioactive substance.

2007 February - Tony Blair announces the first large-scale withdrawal of British troops from Iraq.

2007 May - Leaders of Northern Ireland Assembly sworn in, ending five years of direct rule from London.

Pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) becomes the largest party in the Scottish Parliament following elections.

2007 July - Diplomatic row between London and Moscow over Britain's bid for the extradition of Andrei Lugovoi, an ex-KGB agent accused of Mr Litvinenko's murder.

2008 February - The government nationalises the troubled mortgage lender Northern Rock. Funding problems at the bank in the second half of 2007 triggered the first run on a British bank in more than a century.

2009 November - Britain withdraws bulk of its remaining troops in southern Iraq, leaving only a small force tasked with training the Iraqi military.

Iraq inquiry chaired by former civil servant Sir John Chilcot opens. Its stated aim is to "learn the lessons" of the Iraq conflict.

2010 November - UK concludes military and nuclear accord with France. Under the terms of the new treaty, the two countries will cooperate in testing nuclear warheads.

2011 March-September - Britain plays a prominent part in the international intervention in the conflict in Libya.

2011 August - The killing of a 29-year old man by police sparks widespread riots and looting in poorer areas of London, as well as in several other English cities. Insurers estimate the cost of the damage at more than £200m.

2013 May - A soldier, Drummer Lee Rigby, is hacked to death in south London by two Islamic extremists, causing widespread public revulsion.

2013 August - The House of Commons votes to block UK military involvement in Syria, in what is seen as a major political embarrassment for the government.