Few figures in British history have engendered so much controversy as Oliver Cromwell. From a humble background, Cromwell began his political career as an MP for Huntingdon and eventually went on to become the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of the Three Kingdoms between 1653 and 1658. To some, Oliver Cromwell was a sincere and brave defender of religion, able to restore peace and economic prosperity during the political and social turmoil that followed the execution of Charles I. To others, however, he was a dictatorial and murderous hypocrite, whose deeply Puritanical beliefs were used to mask his lust for power. Nevertheless, a statue of Cromwell stands outside the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, along with some of the great figures of British history such as Winston Churchill and Richard the Lion Heart. The statue, funded privately by the former Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, and erected in 1899, has inevitably fueled a wide division of opinion, and the question is raised as to whether Cromwell is deserving of such an accolade.

Oliver Cromwell’s attempt to reform the intolerant and uncompromising religious system in England, created under Charles I, into a relatively broad and flexible Church is certainly commendable. Non-conformist services which inevitably followed the upheavals of the Civil War were encouraged by Cromwell in an attempt to allow a degree of religious diversity within a framework of acceptable doctrine. He remained a consistent advocate of tolerance for all Protestants. His personal sympathies for the more radical religious factions are epitomised by the case of James Nayler, a Quaker who in 1656 reenacted the entry of Christ into Jerusalem through the gates at Bristol. Viewed as deeply unacceptable by the more conservative members of the Second Protectorate Parliament, Nayler narrowly escaped a death sentence, rescued only by Cromwell’s personal intervention.

Cromwell’s dilemma was balancing the fears of MPs who saw the collapse of social order all around them, whilst achieving his vision of a godly and unified nation. This became a key reason for an often strenuous relationship. He maintained close relations with figures as far removed from his personal views as George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, and convinced Parliament to pass the Toleration Act of 1650. This abolished the requirement to attend services of the National Church, thus granting some freedom to non-conformists. Furthermore, Cromwell’s establishment of the Committee of Triers and Ejectors in 1654 was established in order to nominate and eject suitable ministers. Emphasis was placed on the quality of preaching rather than the Christian denomination, leading to an increase of ministers who were Presbyterian, Independent and Baptist sympathisers. Finally, Cromwell’s genuine respect for the consciences of others can be shown through his removal of the Edict of Expulsion in 1657, a ban on Jewish settlement within England that had been enforced by Edward I in 1290. Although his motivation was largely economic, this was nonetheless illustrative of his religious tolerance.

Attitudes towards Catholics and Anglicans during this period, however, remained largely unaltered from those of Elizabeth I’s rule and therefore there were limitations to Cromwell’s flexibility. Although Cromwell argued consistently for a unified National Church in which freedom of worship was granted to many Protestant groups, Catholics and supporters of bishops remained excluded from toleration laws throughout his rule. The most infamous and savage case of suppression of the Catholics was Cromwell’s campaign in Ireland in 1649, where he stormed the Royalist strongholds of Drogheda and Wexford with severe brutality. Thousands of allegedly unarmed soldiers were killed but what made the invasion so unprecedentedly barbarous was the slaughtering of innocent civilians and clerics. Frequently considered as the most hated man in Irish history, Cromwell has been classed by some in the same league as figures such as Adolf Hitler. The ‘curse of Cromwell’ remains deep in Irish tradition, and the destruction of many buildings in Ireland is blamed on him. Cromwell’s actions can in part explain the historic Irish resentment of the English. However, historians such as Tom Reilly have challenged the credibility of the events in Ireland and have argued that Cromwell’s methods and attitude were relatively standard of 17th century siege warfare. Nonetheless, Cromwell and his troops fought with unnecessary levels of violence and brutality. The hatred of Cromwell can be shown firstly by the bitter opposition of the Irish Parliamentary Party when the government initially proposed a statue of him in 1895, and secondly by numerous petitions presented to modern day parliaments, demanding the removal of the statue.

Although the beginning of the British empire can be traced back to the reign of Elizabeth I, the colonial expansion that occurred under Cromwell’s rule was unprecedented and the policies implemented during the Interregnum allowed for Britain’s eventual imperial domination. This is another key argument for meriting a statue outside Parliament. Under Cromwell, the Protectorate committed itself to strengthening British sovereignty and disrupting the Spanish monopoly on trade - between 1646 and 1659, for example, one hundred and nine vessels were built and one hundred and eleven were captured. This vast investment was initially intended to counter the threat of the Dutch and the Spanish, but Britain soon became powerful enough to intervene in the Caribbean and in 1655 Jamaica was captured from the Spanish. This achievement was fundamental to the development of the sugar trade as well as the enforcement of British supremacy at sea. Furthermore, the Navigation Act of 1651 ensured that all goods imported to England and its territories were carried on English ships by a crew that were at least half English – this reflected the increasingly popular policy of mercantilism, which aimed to keep all the benefits of trade within the British empire whilst minimizing the loss of gold and silver to foreigners. The Act was the first time in which British territories were integrated into British law and politics - Britain and her colonies were treated as one entity. Cromwell’s colonial policies were the foundation of Britain’s commercial expansion and success and their significance is emphasized by their continued use following the Restoration.

Cromwell has been labelled a hypocrite, who, having murdered the king and abolished the monarchy, then failed to create a suitable constitution. Charles I’s deeply unpopular absolutist methods involved the persecution of those who did not follow what he perceived as the true faith of the Church of England – respected Puritan gentlemen such as Prynne, Burton and Bastwick, for example, were impeached and mutilated for publishing attacks on the bishops of the Laudian church. Cromwell’s methods were arguably no less oppressive. The abolition of the House of Lords in 1649 increased the power of the House of Commons and with it the social diversity of Parliament. However, its power was curtailed when it challenged Cromwell’s will. He forcibly dissolved the Rump Parliament with the assistance of army troops in April 1653, increasingly frustrated by its inability to maintain the momentum needed to pass laws as well as its refusal to hold a general election. The legality of Cromwell’s actions was questioned by Parliament and following its dissolution, failed attempts were made to reduce the power of the Protector by minimizing the size of the standing army.

Furthermore, when dissatisfied with the developments of the First Protectorate Parliament, Cromwell refused further cooperation and instead turned to the advice of the major-generals who were unrepresentative of the views of the majority of Parliament. This mirrored Charles I’s approach, who had relied on the advice of unpopular councilors such as the Lord Admiral, Buckingham, the Earl of Strafford and the Arminian Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud. Direct military rule was imposed on England between August 1655 and January 1657. England was divided in to twelve districts, each under the control of a major general who implemented strict regulations to prevent conspiracies against the government. Those who protested were dealt with harshly. This had revealed the Protectorate to be a military despotism rather than a moderate and progressive government. Therefore, when focusing solely on Cromwell’s autocratic methods and ruthlessness, a statue would not be merited.

However, when concluding whether Cromwell merits commemoration outside the Houses of Parliament, it is worth examining the other statues which stand there. These include representations of great figures such as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. Although from hugely different eras, backgrounds and positions, there are arguably themes which connect these men with Oliver Cromwell. All were instrumental in taking their nations through periods of radical change and leaving marks on their country which had positive implications long in to the future. Cromwell, for example, was key in the promotion of religious toleration for which Britain arguably still has a positive reputation. Similarly, these figures are known to have at some point used unpopular or controversial methods – Lincoln, for example, was prepared to embark on a course of Civil War and Churchill is deemed responsible for the disastrous Allied failures at Gallipoli between 1915 and 1916. However, the more contentious events of their careers are greatly outweighed by their ultimate achievements, and the same can be said for Oliver Cromwell.

The paradoxical nature of Cromwell’s rule makes his assessment particularly difficult. His religious toleration is undermined by his undoubtedly ruthless approach to the Irish Catholics and his support for the parliamentary cause is weakened by his arguably autocratic methods. Overall, however, Cromwell’s ability to rule and maintain unity in England, Ireland and Scotland following the chaos of the Civil War, whilst enforcing progressive religious and economic policies which would benefit Britain long in to the future ultimately proves he is worthy of a statue outside the Houses of Parliament. Cromwell’s ecclesiastical arrangement may have been removed following the Restoration of 1660, but his influence on the religious development in England was so great that the comprehensive and tolerant ideology that he inspired did not. Similarly, the increase in the importance of parliament following the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords was not simply a phenomenon which would fade away after the death of the Protector in 1658. The ideas, encouraged by Cromwell, which formulated and spread across England under his rule became his fundamental legacy and would ultimately help in causing the Glorious Revolution in 1688. During these events, religious toleration became a law permanently engrained into British society and parliamentary power was officially secured in the establishment of the constitutional monarchy. These developments greatly benefitted both England and Britain and merits Oliver Cromwell’s statue at the geographic and spiritual heart of British governance.