Preface

This book comprises essays on religion, politics, and ideas in Restoration England. With the exception of the Introduction, earlier versions have previously appeared, but in places that are scattered and sometimes hard to retrieve. They are brought together here in order to provide a sustained consideration of the mental world of a deeply divided nation, struggling to cauterize the damage done to England’s social fabric by religiously inspired violence – for that was the legacy of the Reformation, the Civil Wars, and an inconstant monarchy. I have selected essays which have been widely cited and which endure in contemporary scholarship. I have confined the selection to those which deal chiefly with the era we call the Restoration, between the return of Charles II to his thrones in 1660 and the deposition of his brother James II in 1688.

The character of these essays is diverse. Some touch on the history of philosophy, some concern politics ‘on the ground’, while others are case studies of individual authors or moments. While some deal in secular ideas, most emphasize the interconnectedness of religious and political thinking, and stress the institutional and ideological salience of the church and its critics. Intellectual, political, and religious history should not be treated as separate pursuits, as too often they still are. Scholars, it is true, are obliged to work within disciplinary boundaries, and a hope is that these essays may find readers in several disciplines: history, political theory, literature, theology, and the history of philosophy.

The texts of these essays have been revised to finesse the prose and correct errors. In most cases, the content has not been altered in major ways, although I have sometimes either abridged or supplied additional material. Occasional overlaps remain, where material does service in different contexts. I have especially aimed to update citations in the footnotes to provide a guide to recent scholarship. Each essay is self-contained and may be read independently, as well as in the ensemble.

The book is about England. There was no British polity before 1707; Scotland was distinct, and has its own history; as does Ireland. I have not attempted to embrace the thought of all these isles.