We are used to thinking about Britain now as being divided into three national units: England, Wales and Scotland. Yet these are not independent political units. At least for now, all the citizens of each ‘nation’ are called ‘British’ citizens on their passport. In the twelfth century, however, there was no such politically united Britain. Although Britain existed as a coherent unit in the minds of medieval chroniclers, there was no formal title of king of Britain. Yet this did not stop its kings jostling for control over each other and over parts of the island. Nor were these relations only the concern of kings within the island of Britain (the king of the English, the king of Scots and the Welsh kings). The king of Man and the Isles was, for the most part, under the overlordship of the king of Norway; England itself was ruled by kings who were first and foremost dukes and counts in France and spent much of their time across the English Channel. In the 1170s, Henry II even made a move to conquer Ireland; his son John, and English kings after John, henceforth bore the title ‘lord of Ireland’, until 1542, when Henry VIII changed it to ‘king’.

This lecture is devoted to understanding what the political makeup of the British Isles (including Ireland) was during this period and how and why it changed. How and why did kings and rulers come into contact with one another and what were the results? Moreover, this is also the period seen by R. R. Davies to have cemented the English king’s dominance over the rulers of the British Isles. The English kings came to be far more politically superior than they had before; this was only increased by the developing notion of the ethnic and cultural superiority of the English over the other peoples of the British Isles. By the reign of Henry III, the English kings had assumed a position of superior power and identity that would have profound and dramatic consequences for the fate of Britain during the reign of Edward I. Was Davies correct to characterise the period in this way? Or did he ignore the very real reconfigurations of power and identity happening elsewhere in the Isles that had as much an effect on the subsequent history of Britain as anything the English kings did themselves?

Questions to consider:
- What were the main political units in the British Isles and how did these change?
- How did kings and rulers interact with one another and what were the results?
- Did English kings wish to dominate the island of Britain and even conquer it?
- What were the differences (political and cultural) between the many kings and rulers of the British Isles?
- How did the English perceive themselves in relation to the other peoples of British Isles?
- Why were English kings able to exert their political dominance over the whole island of Britain in a way that Welsh and Scottish kings were not?

Seminar:

The source material for this seminar focusses on the late twelfth century, so you can get a sense of how English domination over other kings in Britain worked before the reign of Edward I. The year chosen is 1175. In this year, Henry II returned to England after the end of the huge rebellion that had broken out against his rule, both in England and the continent. This was the first time he had returned to England since the pacification of the revolt. Over the course of this year, Henry travelled around his kingdom, making peace and enforcing submissions. In particular, many of the rulers of the British Isles came to him and reinforced their relationships with him. The chronicler Roger of Howden best describes these submissions. Your job is to read them and then consider: what does Henry want from the Welsh, Irish and Scots? What might they want from him? How does his treatment of each group differ and what might account for these differences?

If you have time, either in the seminar, or on your own back, read the so-called ‘Treaty of Falaise’, drawn up between King Henry II and King William ‘the Lion’ in December 1174. William had been captured and imprisoned by Henry’s forces during the 1173-4 rebellion. Obviously, he is not in that good of a position. What does Henry extract from him?