

# The English Reformation – A Time of Martyrs

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During Henry VIII's reign, England started on a journey of religious change. The old faith, Roman Catholicism, was pushed aside in favour of a new Protestant Church of England. It was neither a seamless nor a peaceful transition. Both sides suffered during the reigns of Henry and his children, but by the close of the House of Tudor, the Church of England was firmly established and remains so today.

### Key Dates

- 1509 Henry VIII accedes to the throne, Marries Catherine of Aragon
- 1517 Martin Luther publishes his 95 theses sparking the Protestant reformation
- 1521 Henry awarded title of Defender of the Faith by the Pope
- 1526 First translation of the Bible to English by William Tyndale
- 1527 Henry is set on a divorce from Catherine
- 1533 Henry marries Anne Boleyn, Statute in Restraint of Appeals.
- 1534 Act of Supremacy – Henry becomes Head of the Church of England
- 1536 Tyndale executed for heresy, Dissolution of the monasteries begins.
- 1547 Death of Henry. Edward VI accedes to throne.
- 1549 First Book of Common Prayer published
- 1553 Death of Edward. Mary I accedes to the throne.
- 1554 Roman Catholicism restored.
- 1556 Thomas Cranmer executed for heresy
- 1558 Death of Mary; Elizabeth I accedes to the throne, Final break with Rome.
- 1563 39 Articles published setting out Anglican doctrine
- 1587 Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots
- 1588 Spanish Armada defeated
- 1603 Death of Elizabeth; James VI of Scotland accedes to English throne as James I

### Key Figures

- King Henry VIII King of England
- Catherine of Aragon Henry's first wife
- Anne Boleyn Henry's second wife
- King Edward VI King of England
- Queen Mary I Queen of England
- Queen Elizabeth I Queen of England

# History

## The Great Schism

Christianity had arrived in England during the first century, brought by the Romans. For centuries, England followed the Roman Church. There were dissenters, such as the Lollards, but they faced almost universal opposition from the clergy and state. In 1517, German clergyman and scholar Martin Luther produced his 95 Theses in which he protested at many of the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. His action sparked the schism in the Church that led to the Protestant Reformation.

While Luther's ideas found increasing favour, Henry VIII was a firm believer in Roman Catholic doctrine. He was also a well-read scholar. In 1521 he wrote and published his own rebuttal of Luther's ideas. Grateful for his support, the Pope awarded him the title of "Fidei Defensor," or "Defender of the Faith."

Henry's loyalty to the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church was tested within a few years. Catherine of Aragon, Henry's wife, had failed to provide him with the son he needed if his dynasty was to continue. Catherine was getting past the age of child-bearing and by 1527, Henry's eyes had alighted on a vivacious and alluring lady of the court, Anne Boleyn. Henry petitioned the Pope for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine, citing Biblical references to support his case that his marriage was wrong in the eyes of God due to Catherine's first marriage to Henry's late brother, Prince Arthur. Henry's theological arguments did not sway the Pope, who was mindful of the fact that Catherine was the aunt of the most powerful man in Europe, the Holy Roman Emperor. The annulment was not forthcoming, despite years of negotiating. Henry was determined to find another route out of his marriage.



Anne Boleyn was more than just a pretty face. She was educated, intelligent and interested in the ideas of the Protestant Reformation. Along with Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, Anne saw a way out for Henry. Cromwell, a lawyer and Member of Parliament, was quietly supportive of the Protestant cause and he rose to prominence as an assistant to Cardinal Wolsey. His friend Cranmer was a leading clergyman who had become favourable to Lutheranism and who was appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1532, through the lobbying of the Boleyn family. Between them, Cromwell and Cranmer were able to find a solution to the King's Great Matter: a break with Rome.

Once Cranmer had become Archbishop, he began working on the legal case for annulling Henry's marriage. Henry did not wait for the conclusion of Cranmer's work. He had no time to lose because Anne Boleyn was pregnant, so he married her in January 1533. Cromwell was laying the groundwork to deal with the dissent that would inevitably arise when Cranmer declared the annulment of Henry's first marriage. He drafted an Act of Parliament that established the monarch as the final legal authority in England and Wales and forbade any appeals on religious or other matters to the Pope. The Statute in Restraint of Appeals was the cornerstone of the Reformation in England. It not only allowed Cranmer to grant Henry his annulment without reference to Rome, but it also declared England to be an independent country and empire that was not subject to any foreign authority on any matter. Henry was declared the Supreme Head of the Church of England the following year in the Act of Supremacy.

Henry had achieved his objective in breaking with Rome. His first marriage was annulled, and he was married to Anne. The door to the Reformation was open, but Henry remained a Catholic at heart and balked at full-scale reform. That was left to men like Cromwell and Cranmer. With Queen Anne's influence, they were able to appoint reformers who were willing to challenge the faith. Although Henry was happy to preside over the dissolution of the monasteries, which brought him considerable wealth, he opposed radical change. In 1539, he had Parliament pass the Six Articles which restated Roman Catholic ideas of the clergy, Mass, and the sacraments and brought in punishments for those who challenged them. The king also disagreed with the idea that an English Bible should be readily available. When William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English, was executed abroad for heresy he cried out from the stake "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

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Henry's conservatism was confirmed when he appointed like-minded men to be on the regency council for his son on his death. In Henry's mind, the split with Rome was all the reformation that was needed.

After Henry's death in 1547, his nine-year old son took the throne. Edward had been brought up as a Protestant. Intelligent and precocious, he was a firm believer in the Protestant cause. Any change to the country would have been delayed had his father's original choice regency council stood, but it was changed and Edward's uncle, Edward Seymour, took control. Major changes were put into action in the first year of the new king's reign.

Churches were targeted first. Stained glass, images, shrines, and statues were removed or destroyed as an altogether plainer style of church was demanded. Stone altars were replaced by wooden communion tables. Priests lost their vestments but were allowed to marry. People were no longer allowed to pay for masses to be said for the souls of the departed, and religious processions were banned. A new Common Prayer Book, written in English, had been introduced in Henry's reign, which followed the Catholic tradition, but now a new version, far more radical, was distributed.

These were huge changes for the English since religion was at the core of their lives. Some embraced the changes while others clung to the Catholic traditions. Rebellions broke out in Cornwall, Devon, and East Anglia, while in other places there was a quieter resistance, with people simply not remodeling their churches, hiding vestments and altars or hearing Mass in private. Indeed, so unpopular was the Reformation that it was in danger of grinding to a halt anyway, but the death of Edward meant that it did not just stop, it was turned on its head.

Edward had attempted to protect his Protestant legacy by naming his cousin, Lady Jane Grey, as his successor. Like Edward, Lady Jane was a fervent Protestant and far preferable to his Catholic older sister Mary. However, the country preferred to take its chances on Mary, and after a reign of less than two weeks, Lady Jane was deposed and put in the Tower of London to await trial.

Mary, like her late mother Catherine of Aragon, was a devout Catholic. She had no love for the Protestants; their rise had meant her mother's fall. Her dearest wish was to return the country to the bosom of Rome, for the sake of her people's souls. Mary sought to turn the clock back, starting by ordering her parents' marriage to be declared valid once again. Thomas Cranmer was



ousted as Archbishop of Canterbury and tried for heresy. He recanted several times during his imprisonment, but it was not enough to save him from a heretic's death. At the last moment, he renounced his recantations and thrust his right hand, the hand that had signed his recantations, into the fire saying that it had offended God and should be burnt first. Cranmer was just one of many whom Mary sent to the stake. Some were well-known, others just ordinary people. There were more than 300 victims of Mary's quest to rid England of Protestants, earning her the nickname "Bloody Mary."

All of Mary's attempts to reintroduce the Catholic faith were to be in vain. Despite marrying her Catholic cousin, Philip of Spain, she was to die childless and her successor, her sister Elizabeth, was a Protestant.

Elizabeth could be nothing else; her parents' marriage was not recognised by the Catholic Church, making her claim to the throne invalid in Catholic eyes. During her sister's reign, she had been obliged to attend Mass so as to avoid conflict on religion and perhaps the fate of those who had been executed. She had also seen the unhappiness and turmoil created in her brother's reign when he had forced through radical reforms to the church. Learning from her sibling's mistakes, her approach throughout her reign was to be one of religious tolerance. She remarked that she did not want to make "windows into men's souls." As long as people trod the middle ground, the queen was happy to let them make their own way.

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One of the first hurdles in Elizabeth's reign was undoing Mary's legislation that returned England to the Church in Rome. Elizabeth's first attempt, the Reformation Bill, which would have made her Head of the Church and had harsh penalties for Roman Catholics, was defeated in Parliament. Two redrafted bills were later passed – the Act of Supremacy 1558 and the Act of Uniformity 1558. The former made Elizabeth the Supreme Governor of the Church, a title which was acceptable to more conservative bishops. The latter made it mandatory for people to attend an Anglican Church service on a Sunday and to read from the Common Book of Prayer.

Despite Elizabeth's liberal approach, there was religious strife during her reign. Those on either end of the religious spectrum were not pleased with the queen, and she did not tolerate them. On the one hand were the Roman Catholics who still gave their allegiance to the Pope. These people could not accept Elizabeth as queen since, according to the Pope, she was illegitimate. Their loyalty to their religion was incompatible with their loyalty to the crown, so they were considered traitors. From this group, Mary, Queen of Scots, would draw support for her claims to her cousin's throne. At the other end of the religious spectrum were the radical Protestants who agitated for further reform for the Church of England and who would eventually separate from it.

## Legacy

On her death, Elizabeth left the throne to the son of Mary, Queen of Scots. James, I was a Protestant who inherited a nation that was largely at peace with itself and content with the reformed Church of England but at whose edges there was simmering discontent. Both Catholics and Puritans would resort to violence during the reigns of the Stuarts, and both would be on the receiving end of persecution. However, the Anglican Church, with the monarch as Supreme Governor, remains the established Church to this day.

Despite the Reformation, British coins continue to carry the legend "Fid. Def." or "FD" to commemorate the Pope's award of the title of "Fidei Defensor" to Henry VIII, a title that the monarch still retains.

## Sites to Visit

At the University Church St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, a plaque is set into the wall commemorating both Catholic and Protestant martyrs who were connected with the town. Thomas Cranmer's name is remembered since he was executed in Oxford.

St Edward King and Martyr Church in Cambridge is sometimes called the Cradle of the English Reformation as several clergymen preached about the new teaching from its pulpit. Three men, Thomas Bilney, Robert Barnes and Hugh Latimer, who were all executed, are commemorated on a plaque. The trio also met at the nearby White Horse Inn, the site of which is marked by a blue plaque.

On the wall of Drake's Pub, Fairmeadow, Maidstone there is a plaque commemorating seven people who were burnt at the stake nearby in 1557.

Although divided by religion in life, Mary I and her half-sister Elizabeth I are buried together at Westminster Abbey in a tomb which bears the inscription: "Consorts in realm and tomb, here we sleep, Elizabeth and Mary, sisters, in hope of resurrection."

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