

2 The political background to the Reformation in England

The English Reformation started with Henry VIII's desire for a son and heir. It continued during the short reign of Edward VI, received a check during Mary's Catholic revival, then was firmly established during Elizabeth's long reign.



Portrait of Henry VIII, after Hans Holbein.
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Henry VIII

Henry VIII was the originator of the break with Rome. Henry desperately wanted a son to continue his line, and his wife Katherine had only produced a daughter, Mary, and it looked as if she could have no more children. Henry applied to the Pope to have the marriage annulled but the Pope prevaricated under pressure from Katherine's nephew, Emperor Charles V, who was threatening Rome at the time. So Henry took matters into his own hands by reverting to a tradition that the church in England was older than the church in Rome and so its headship belonged not to the Pope but to the King.

With the authority now vested in the English church, Henry's divorce from Katherine was quickly accomplished, and

Henry married Anne Boleyn in January 1533 who bore him Elizabeth in September of that year. The ecclesiastical changes were completed by the Act of Supremacy passed in 1534, which declared Henry to be the 'Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England'. However, although the King's chief minister Thomas Cromwell soon closed down all the monasteries, there was limited change to church liturgy (except that Henry had decreed that a Bible in English be placed in every church) until Henry's son, Edward, came to the throne.



Portrait of Edward VI, attributed to William Scrots.
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Edward VI

When Henry died in 1547, his only son, Edward VI was only nine years old and so authority was initially vested in the regency of Edward Seymour, the new King's uncle, a Protestant. The boy king (and Princess Elizabeth, his older sister) had also been educated by Protestants, and so the regency and Archbishop Cranmer set about a thoroughly Protestant Reformation of the now separate English Church.

The prayer book was issued in English, and 'monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, superstition and idolatry' were destroyed. Every church was instructed to invest in a pulpit 'for the preaching of God's Word'. England began to shelter many refugees from the bitter continental wars of religion.

However, this was only a brief reformation as Edward died in 1553 and his elder sister Mary, who had been brought up a Catholic by her mother Katherine, came to the throne determined to undo all the changes.

Mary

Although she initially appealed for religious tolerance, Mary quickly rounded up leading reformers and by the end of the year Parliament had repealed all the Edwardian religious legislation. The Catholic Mass was restored, altars rebuilt, images re-hung and the wearing of vestments reinstated.

There appears to have been little popular resentment with this abrupt return to Catholicism, suggesting that the 'top-down' Edwardian reformation had not been deep seated in the English psyche. Nonetheless, Mary's subsequent actions provoked widespread dismay and active opposition starting when she announced her marriage to Prince Philip of Spain.

In 1555, she revived the old medieval heresy laws and Protestants who refused to accept the Catholic faith were sentenced to death. Over the next four years 280 men and women were burnt at the stake and 30 more died in prison. Although the South East was the principal area of martyrdoms, only three individuals from Surrey lost their lives.

Mary's reign ended suddenly when her abdominal swelling proved to be stomach cancer rather than the pregnancy she had hoped for and she died in 1558 after only five years on the throne, leaving her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth as Queen.



Portrait of Queen Mary painted by Antonis Mor.
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Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth was a convinced Protestant able to read the New Testament in Greek, which she did daily, as well as reading regularly from an English Bible and praying in English. Most of the bishops in post during Mary's reign refused to serve under Elizabeth so many of these vacancies were filled by returnees from the continent full of Protestant zeal, and the Edwardian reforms were restored. The English prayer book was reinstated and the church reconstituted with the thoroughly Protestant 'Thirty-nine Articles of Religion'.

Her excommunication in 1570 by the Pope, who called on all Catholics to refuse to obey her, had the effect of turning

Elizabeth I, attributed to Federico Zuccari.
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Catholics from heretics to traitors and several plots against Elizabeth were uncovered. Elizabeth also cautiously aided beleaguered Protestants threatened by Catholic forces by sending small expeditionary forces to Scotland and Holland. In 1588, the Spanish Armada cemented the feeling that the Catholic powers of Europe were England's enemies, and, when the Armada was destroyed by massive storms as well as by Drake's seamanship, that God was on England's side.

By the end of Elizabeth's reign nearly 50 years of Protestant Church of England practice had established Protestantism as the dominant expression of faith in England.