

# 4 How the English Bible came to us

Before the Reformation, the church frowned on the idea of allowing common people to read the Bible in their own language, preferring to keep interpretative control in the hands of church leaders. Nevertheless unlicensed English translations, by John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, provided ordinary people with access to the biblical text, although the latter was martyred for producing it. Yet within two years of Tyndale's martyrdom, Henry VIII had authorised the so-called Great Bible, an English translation of the entire Bible for use in the Church of England, and 70 years later, King James authorised a new English translation, the Authorised (AV), or King James Version (KJV). The committee of scholars commissioned to do the translation included Guildford's own George Abbott.



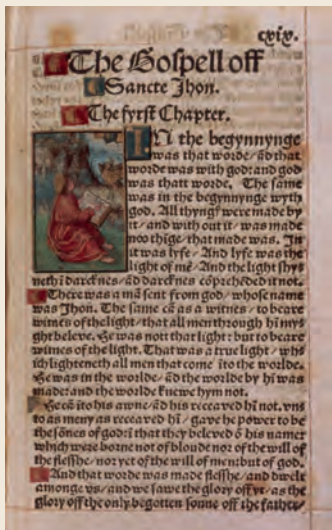
Wycliffe Bible – John's Gospel.  
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At the start of the Reformation, Latin was the language of the church, and although some translations of the Bible were available in European languages, the church authorities authorised only the 1,000-year-old Vulgate translation from the original Greek and Hebrew into Latin by Jerome. The church dissuaded its parishioners from reading the Bible as it decreed that only the church and the Pope had the right to interpret the Bible. In England, it was even an offence subject to penalty of death to produce or own an unlicensed English translation. Nevertheless, at the dawn of the Reformation in England, hand-copied versions of the Bible translated by John Wycliffe in the 14th century were being secretly kept and read by many of his followers.

The Reformers argued that the authority for Christian belief, worship and practice lay in Scripture alone (*Sola scriptura*) so believers needed access to God's Word. Martin Luther said, "Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scriptures", arguing that lay people should be able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, and so he translated and published a Bible in vernacular German. As the Reformation's ideas spread through Europe (helped by the invention of the printing press), an Oxford educated scholar, William Tyndale, set

out to translate the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew so that, as he said to a cleric, "I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!". As this was illegal in England he sought refuge on the continent, where printing presses were turning out literature from the Reformers.

Tyndale was a translator of genius, taking great care to fashion readable text, and coming up with many phrases that are still recognisable today: 'my brother's keeper', 'the powers that be' and 'the signs of the times'. Before he finished he was betrayed and arrested in 1535 in Brussels, then convicted of heresy and burnt at the stake the following year. It is said that his dying prayer was for the King of England's eyes to be opened.



Tyndale Bible – John's Gospel.  
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Two years later, Henry authorised the publication of an English language Bible, the so-called Great Bible for the Church of England, which ironically borrowed extensively from Tyndale's translation.

## The Authorised Version or the King James Bible

Shortly after ascending the throne, King James I convened a conference at Hampton Court in 1604 which commissioned a new translation, which became known as the Authorised Version or the King James Bible. Although a committee of 54 scholars was appointed to do the translation, which was completed in 1611, the final text of the KJV borrowed over 75% of Tyndale's translation, demonstrating the quality of Tyndale's work.

Guildford's own George Abbott was a leading member of the translation committee.



Statue of George Abbot in Guildford High Street.

Photo J. Skelton

Abbott was born in Guildford and became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1611. Such was the quality of the translation that by the 18th century, the AV was virtually unchallenged as the English translation used in Protestant churches throughout the British Empire and the United States, becoming the most widely printed book in history.

Since then there have been many modern translations into English, taking advantage of newly discovered manuscripts in the original Greek and Hebrew. However, the influence of the AV on English language and culture as well as religion, cannot be overstated. Its religious influence stems from its dominance for centuries as the translation of choice for Christians throughout the English-speaking world. Its influence on our language comes from the literary quality of the translation. While the committee of translators sought to be faithful to the original text languages, they also read aloud their translations to assure the text worked in the cadence of English, sometimes introducing Hebraic forms of speech such as 'he lift up his eyes', which lend a poetic tone. All of this careful work produced literature of magisterial quality which lends itself to being recited publicly. The KJV's influence on our culture is reflected in the fact that hundreds of phrases and idioms have made their way into our everyday language, such as 'reap the whirlwind', 'at their wit's end', 'an eye for an eye', 'the skin of my teeth', 'a thorn in the flesh' and 'love thy neighbour as thyself'.

**Personally owned copies of early Bibles are available for inspection on request.**