

3 The political background to the Reformation in England

James I allowed Protestantism to continue on the understanding that it maintained his monarchical status, but Charles' high-handed approach to Parliament ended in a civil war in which religion was a factor. Following the Protectorate of Cromwell, the country once again welcomed monarchy but as a settled Protestant country with an established Protestant church which was Episcopal but not Puritan.



King James I of England and VI of Scotland, by Daniel Mytens. Commons.wikimedia.org

James I

Brought up on a diet of Scottish Calvinism, James was well aware of the perils that the religious dimension added to rule in Scotland and England. Even before he reached London, he was presented with a petition by Puritans asking for changes to the prayer book.

James had firm ideas on the divine authority of kingship, especially his own. He convened a conference at Hampton Court to consider the questions put to him by the Puritans. The conference was inconclusive on the prayer book but did come up with a plan for a new 'Authorised' version of the Bible to be prepared (see 4).

In 1605, Catholic zealots attempted to murder him and the government by blowing up Parliament. This 'Gunpowder Plot', foiled in the nick of time, is now remembered every year on 5th November. It further alienated public opinion from Catholicism, but at the same time, on the opposite wing of the church, Puritans despaired of thorough reform of the church from the typically English accommodation that had resulted from the to and fro of church reorganisation over the previous century. In 1620, the first English Puritan émigrés sailed aboard the 'Mayflower' to the New World to start again afresh.



King Charles I, by Anthony Van Dyck. Commons.wikimedia.org

Charles I

Charles seems to have been totally out of touch with his subjects. Where James proceeded cautiously, and his views on religion were tempered by his Scottish upbringing, Charles leaned towards the 'High Church' party in the Church of England that despised the Reformation, and in Archbishop Laud he found a sympathetic ear.

When Charles attempted to impose Laud's new prayer book on his Scottish subjects, this was met with riots in the pews and some Scots vowed to resist religious

innovations and abolish episcopacy in a covenant (which some signed with their own blood).

An army sent to deal with this was sent packing, and when Charles tried to recall Parliament to finance his Scottish adventures, his unpopularity led to outright revolt by Parliament and eventually civil war. Although nominally over the rights of the King and Parliament, the war was fuelled by religious differences which bitterly divided the country right down to individual families. Charles eventually paid for this with his head and Cromwell took over as Lord Protector of the 'Commonwealth of England'.



Oliver Cromwell, by Samuel Cooper. Commons.wikimedia.org

Oliver Cromwell

During the Commonwealth, a host of different sects emerged – from the sober, such as the Quakers, to the ecstatic, such as the Ranters, a sect which encouraged nudity and sexual license.

During this period, theatres were closed, the Sabbath was strictly upheld, swearing was fined and Christian festivals such as Christmas banned. Regardless of their spiritual aspirations, ordinary English folk were made to behave as if they were 'Godly Puritans' and not many liked this.

People soon began to yearn for the old days, so when Cromwell died without leaving a capable successor, the crown was offered to Charles II.

Charles II

Charles II, the merry monarch, was the opposite of the strict Puritans and England did not just relax but, in reaction to the Puritanism of the Commonwealth, embraced license.

In 1662, the prayer book was re-imposed and clergy were forced to accept it. Many refused and were ejected from their ministry. Despite this, some Puritan pastors continued to flout the orders and over 20,000 were imprisoned for this. The results were unpredictable – one famous pastor, John Bunyan, produced a literary classic *Pilgrim's Progress* whilst in prison.

Further laws meant that public offices could only be held by those that acknowledged the prayer book (that is, they were Anglicans rather than Puritans) and similarly, non-conformists were barred from the universities as students or teachers. Puritanism was cut off at the root of teaching and training the next generation of leaders and never recovered.

At the same time religious freedom in the country reached a nadir from which it took two centuries to recover, incidentally spurring more of those wishing to follow Puritan ways to leave for America, strengthening Puritanism across the Atlantic.



King Charles II, from the studio of John Michael Wright. Commons.wikimedia.org