

# The English Reformation

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Newstead Abbey, ruined during the Reformation

Despite the zeal of religious reformers in Europe, England was slow to question the established Church. During the reign of Henry VIII, however, the tide turned in favour of Protestantism, and by the 1600s the new Church held sway over the old. How did all this come about?

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## **Strange turn of events**

For much of the sixteenth century England and Scotland hated each other with all the passion of warring neighbours. Yet in 1603 a Scottish king would ascend the English throne with the connivance and general approval of the English ruling elite. This unlikely turn of events owed much to the eccentricities of the Welsh Tudor dynasty that had occupied the English for almost precisely that century: the determination of the father, Henry VIII, to marry often and the equal determination of the daughter, Elizabeth, not to marry at all. But it also owed a great deal to Protestantism.

There was little that bound together the English aristocracy and the Scottish king, for whom they developed a profound distaste, than a shared commitment to Protestantism. It was a determination to preserve England as a Protestant nation that gave James VI and I his opportunity and which would doom his son Charles when his actions threatened to undermine this cherished identity.

## **A remarkably smooth transition**

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For all the glories of hindsight, there are many ironies in this unlikely turn of events. The prevailing mood among historians has been to regard the translation of England to Protestantism as largely accidental, and certainly grudging. If England became a Protestant country, it is argued, it did so largely at the behest of its rulers and against its better judgement. If this was so, the transformation was indeed profound, for by the end of the century England and Scotland were rightly regarded as the cornerstones of Protestant Europe.

The faith would become so deeply ingrained that in the seventeenth century both nations would defend their religious affinity with a passion that verged on bigotry. Yet the adoption of Protestantism had been, by the standards of the turmoil that had gripped much of Europe in this period, remarkably smooth.

**Initially, Henry defends the faith**



St Benets Abbey, Norfolk, which fell into decay after the dissolution of the monasteries

England in the sixteenth century, was a land of contrasts. Much less urban than either Germany or the Netherlands, it nevertheless possessed a thriving international trade centre in London and in Oxford and Cambridge, two universities of outstanding reputation. The universities, in fact, would play a significant role in the early campaigns against Luther. Henry VIII turned to their finest theologians for arguments allowing him to enter the lists against the growing threat of Lutheran heresy. This initiative would earn him from a grateful Pope the coveted title, Defender of the Faith.

The progress of the Reformation in England was closely bound up with Henry's personal affairs. His increasing desperation to secure release from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon forced him to contemplate radical steps that went very much against the grain of his own instinctive theological conservatism. In this respect the Reformation in England would follow a model much closer to that of Scandinavia than Germany or Switzerland. Although England, like Bohemia, had its own indigenous mediaeval heresy in Lollardy, Luther's attack on the church had initially produced little resonance in England. Luther's works were imported into England at an early stage, but this may very often have been for the convenience of conservative theologians who bought them to refute them, such as Bishop John Fisher and Sir Thomas More.

**Henry's fateful decision**

'There is no evidence of any great hostility towards the church...before the Reformation'

All of this changed when Henry made the fateful decision that only drastic action could extricate him from a marriage that, in the absence of a male heir, now threatened the future of his dynasty. In rapid succession from 1532, legislation was passed through Parliament curbing the influence of the papacy in England and appointing the King as Supreme Head of the Church. Once this and the divorce were achieved, the king moved to take control over much of the Church's property through the dissolution of the monasteries.

The political nation was, for the most part, obediently compliant rather than enthusiastic. There is no evidence of any great hostility towards the church and its institutions before the Reformation; on the contrary, both the English episcopate and parish clergy seem to have been, by the standards of other European lands, both well-trained and living without scandal. Cardinal Wolsey, who fathered an illegitimate son, was very much the exception. On the other hand, few were prepared to defy the King to defend the threatened institutions of the old church. Many benefited from the windfall of church property that followed the confiscation of monastic lands.

#### **A powerful reforming party emerges at Court**

As Henry's health failed in the last years of his life it became clear that his own actions had encouraged the growth of a powerful evangelical party at Court. On his death in 1547 they moved quickly to establish their supremacy in the regency government made necessary by the youth of the new king, Edward VI (1547-1553). So, the short reign of Edward VI saw a determined attempt to introduce a full Protestant church polity into England, modelled on that of the Swiss and German Reformed churches and driven on by a powerful alliance of Archbishop Cranmer and the Lord Protector, the Duke of Somerset.

In the five years of the king's life, much was achieved: two evangelical Prayer Books, a new English order of service and the stripping of the remaining Catholic paraphernalia from the churches. But time was too short to put down roots. On Edward's death in 1553, the changes were reversed easily by his Catholic half-sister, Mary (1553-1558). Only Mary's devotion to the papacy (which threatened the continued possession of former monastic property in the hands of those who had purchased it from the crown), and her determination to marry her cousin, Philip of Spain, provoked a half-hearted reaction. English Protestantism was reduced once again to a persecuted remnant; many of its ablest figures taking refuge abroad, to avoid martyrdom - the fate of those whom remained behind.

#### **From Mary to Elizabeth**

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So, in 1558 Elizabeth acceded to a troubled throne, after a five-year period in which Catholicism had been re-established in England with little apparent difficulty. Although the changes of Mary's reign were now reversed once more, Elizabeth and her councillors were under no illusions that many of her subjects remained obstinately attached to the old ways. It would be well into the last two decades of Elizabeth's long reign before it could be said with confidence that Protestantism was the religion of the majority in England.

### **The new, insecure regime**

For the first decades those who opposed the religious policies of the Elizabethan government could take comfort from the evident insecurity of a regime embodied by a mature, childless Queen who obstinately refused to marry and whose nearest heir was the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots. Had Elizabeth died early (as she nearly did in 1563, from smallpox), England too might have plunged into the same religious civil war convulsing neighbouring lands on the Continent.

Given this evident insecurity, it was with remarkable confidence that Elizabeth and her advisors addressed those complicated problems of domestic and foreign policy arising from a new restoration of Protestantism.

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A Parliament gathered to settle religion in 1559 compliantly reinstated the Protestant Prayer Book of Edward VI. But Elizabeth balked at the introduction of the full Calvinist Church order urged upon her by foreign theologians and by some of the English exiles who, having withdrawn to the continent during Mary's reign, now returned to assist the new regime. The English church retained Bishops and ecclesiastical vestments, which many of the hotter Protestants regarded as an unacceptable Popish survival. When in 1566 Elizabeth insisted upon uniformity in clerical attire, a substantial proportion of the English clergy (up to ten per cent in London) refused to submit and was deprived. Further attempts to move the Queen to a more perfect Reformation, whether by Parliamentary statute or subtle pressure from the bench of bishops, proved equally unavailing. The Church of England would remain, in the words of its Protestant critics, 'but halfly reformed'.

### **A secure Protestant identity**

Despairing at the Queen's obstinacy and at the apparent indifference of broad sections of the population to the call to a godlier lifestyle, evangelicals took refuge in brotherhoods and congregations that became increasingly detached from the mainstream church. The frustration of reform measures in the Parliaments of 1571 and 1572 led some into formal separation. In the latter years of Elizabeth's reign Puritanism gave way to sectarian non-conformity, and eventually into outright confrontation with the established church.

But the numbers involved in such open dissidence were small, the vast majority of the godly preferring to remain in communion and to seek consolation in voluntary associations which provided an appropriate context for the puritan lifestyle. And in the main, their choice was justified, for whatever their disappointment at Elizabeth's lack of godly zeal, England's general allegiance to the Protestant cause was not in doubt. Even from the beginning of the reign there were evident proofs of this in an ambitious foreign policy which led swiftly to confrontation with the leading Catholic powers. By the last quarter of the century England was destined to play a pivotal role in the survival of Calvinist powers on the Continent, as they faced the most profound threat to their survival from a resurgent Catholicism.

'By 1603, English people had come to esteem their Church.'

By the time Elizabeth's long reign came to an end in 1603, English people had come to esteem their Church. The trials of the last three decades had in a very real sense secured England's Protestant identity. Through a generation of conflict in which the enemy had been foreign, Catholic and dangerous, English people had come to identify their Church and Protestantism, as a cornerstone of their identity.

This was not manifested, necessarily, in any very profound grasp of the theological tenets of faith. While English readers seem to have been avid consumers of catechisms and other cheap volumes of religious instruction, their clergy, as elsewhere in Europe, continued to lament how shallow was their grasp of doctrine. Yet the identification could be more subtle and oblique, but still very real. The Catholic festival year, for instance, had been gradually superseded by a calendar of new, largely unofficial and profoundly Protestant patriotic festivals: the defeat of the Armada, Coronation day, the date of Elizabeth's accession. In 1605 they would be joined by 5 November, the date of the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, proof, if proof were needed that Catholicism was still considered perfidious, deadly and deeply un-English. The celebration of Guy Fawkes' day with bonfires and fireworks is a reminder of how fresh these Reformation controversies remained in the consciousness of the people for many centuries.