



THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

The reign of Henry VIII. Henry VIII (1509-1547) continued his father's policy both at home and abroad; he relied on the support of the middle class and made little use of Parliament, though recognizing its constitutional prerogatives. He improved the administrative system and concentrated on the executive power in his hands. The day-to-day government was carried on by the Council, but its members were, almost exclusively, chosen by the king. The «Justices of the Peace», local bodies existing since the time of Edward III, became more attached to the Council and during Henry's reign their functions and powers increased enormously.

Deeply interested in trade, Henry built the strong navy which was to prove useful to future generations. Henry VIII's main concern in foreign policy was to prevent any European country from becoming excessively strong. He and his Chancellor Cardinal Wolsey (c. 1473-1530) admirably succeeded in keeping balance, supporting the one or the other European nation, according to the exigencies and exploiting the rivalries existing between them.

England had usually supported Spain against France, but the Battle of Pavia (1525) caused a shift of balance: Spain which had become master of Italy, together with the Hapsburgs, was at the time powerful enough to dominate Europe. So Henry and Wolsey reverted their policy and began to gravitate towards France. But at this point Henry VIII was confronted with two different problems: he had married Catherine of Aragon, and a Spanish wife was an obstacle to his new policy; moreover, during his six years of marriage he had had no heir, except Princess Mary. Though female succession to the English throne was possible, there were no precedents, and the future of the Tudor dynasty still remained uncertain. Divorce seemed to Henry the only way of securing an heir and he applied to Pope Clement VII. But the Pope, after the sack of Rome, was virtually a prisoner in the hands of the powerful Charles V, the nephew of Catherine of Aragon, and, after a long delay, Clement VII rejected the king's request. Cardinal Wolsey, who had treated the problem with the Pope, found himself in the strange situation of being both the King's Chancellor and the Pope's Legate. Forced to support the Pope's refusal, he was arrested on charge of treason. He died just in time to avoid execution.

Then Henry VIII, on instigation of his chief advisers Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, appealed to Parliament.

In seven years Parliament passed a series of Acts culminating in the Act of Supremacy of 1534. The English Church separated from Rome, the king was made its Supreme Head, and it was no longer part of an international organization, but was part of the apparatus of the State. Shortly afterwards the Succession Act declared the marriage of the king with Catherine invalid and Henry was free to marry Anne Boleyn (the second of the Six Wives of Henry VIII).

In 1536 the break with Rome was completed with the dissolution of the monasteries: their enormous properties and wealth were transferred to the Crown, which distributed them to its supporters or sold to nobles, merchants and groups of speculators, who, in their turn, resold the lands to small landowners and farmers. This led to the creation of a large and influential class, who had their own interest in preserving the new order of things and also showed a political masterstroke, to secure Reformation.

As we have seen, the Reformation was effected by a small group, the king and his counsellors: it was not by far a popular movement, but the corruption of the clergy, the unpopularity of the Church and the cessation of the large revenue paid to Rome made it generally welcome. Though the Reformation was not without opposition: in fact, political and religious personalities refused to recognize the king's supremacy and the invalidity of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

Shortly after the Reformation, two parties were formed: one led by Thomas Cromwell (c. 1485-1540; executed on charge of high treason) and Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), aiming at inducing the king towards Protestantism; the other under Bishop Gardiner (c. 1490-1555) and Bishop Bonner (1500-1569), which wanted no doctrinal change beyond the denial of the Pope's supremacy.

However Henry VIII's opposition to Rome was rather political than religious and the main Church doctrines and services were never really called into question. The king himself had always been wary of accepting the «heretic» ideas of the most radical reformers: in 1521 he had even been awarded by Pope Leo X the title of «Defender of the Faith» for his attack on the doctrine of Martin Luther.

In 1539 the Bill of Six Articles was issued: it confirmed Christian beliefs and worship forms. For the rest of his life Henry VIII regarded himself as a pious catholic whose religious creed had not been interfered with the break with Rome.

Edward VI and his Protectors. Henry VIII died in 1547 and left a Council of Regence to govern during the minority of his son Edward VI (1547-1553), who at the time was only nine. Edward Seymour (c. 1506-1552), Duke of Somerset, was appointed Protector of the Realm. In this period, under the leadership of an unscrupulous and predatory group, who had greatly benefited from the dissolution of monasteries, the Reformation was pushed towards Protestantism.





An evidence of it was The Book of Common Prayer, containing a revision of the liturgy effected by Thomas Cranmer and other theologians, issued in 1549.

Edward exerted no real power during his short reign and his uncle Somerset concentrated all the State affairs in his hands. Though «the Protector» was bent to the most discreditable intrigues, he felt a genuine desire to remedy the misery caused by the enclosures, which had reduced a great part of arable lands to pasture depriving the peasants of their means of subsistence. His provision to appoint a Commission to inquire into the evasion of the laws against enclosures was bitterly resented by the nobles. When Somerset hesitated in suppressing the Norfolk Revolt in 1549, he was replaced by John Dudley (1502-1553), Duke of Northumberland, who made alliance with the most extreme Protestant party.

As Northumberland realized that Edward was seriously ill, he convinced the Council to exclude both Mary and Elizabeth from succession and to appoint Lady Jane Grey, a granddaughter of Henry VII, as lawful heir; then he married her to his son. When Edward VI died in July 1553 Northumberland proclaimed Lady Jane Grey queen of England.

Bloody Mary. At Edward's death, Princess Mary took refuge in Norfolk, where she received help and support from every part of the country. The sympathy and the hopes of the nation were all concentrated on her. Northumberland's followers refused to fight, and the Duke, his son and Jane Grey, whose reign had lasted nine days, were executed.

Mary became queen of England (1553-1558) without opposition; her first steps were to marry Philip of Spain and to reconcile with Rome through a «supplication» sent to the Pope by Parliament. But her marriage with the Spanish king was unpopular, because the huge class of merchants and tradesmen were used to regard Spain as their commercial rival and the most dangerous enemy. Moreover, in the existing European balance, Mary's marriage kept England under the close control of Spain, destroying the cautious policy of her predecessors.

Mary's religious faith, combined with the lack of political judgement, made her intentioned to restore Catholicism, but the Reformation had reached a too advanced stage to be called back without danger. So Queen Mary, despite her good intentions, and also ill advised by her counsellors, found herself involved in a series of persecutions which characterized her reign and gained her the nickname of Bloody Mary. All the old laws for burning heretics were revived: the most famous victims of her persecutions were Bishop Latimer (1485-1555) and Archbishop Cranmer, but they included a great number of obscure men, such as weavers, artisans and small farmers. The upper class escaped persecution thanks to their ability of professing any faith favourable to their interests.

The connection with Spain in 1557 led to a war against France, the result of which was the loss of Calais, that had been in English hands for almost three centuries. The loss was particularly resented by the merchants, who had always opposed Spain. By that period Mary's persecutions had also begun to alarm the upper class. Discontentment had increased to such a point that the country was on the edge of a revolution, when Mary died in 1558.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1492 Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.

1509-1547 Reign of Henry VIII: 1533 → The king married Anne Boleyn; 1534 → Act of Supremacy.

1547-1553 Reign of Edward VI: 1549 → The Book of Common Prayer.

1553-1558 Reign of Mary: 1553 → Reconciliation with Rome; 1558 → Loss of Calais.

