The Reformation

In the early sixteenth century the people of England and Wales, like nearly all other European nations, practiced the Roman Catholic faith. The birth of an independent Church of England was brought about partly as the result of the movement of religious reform in continental Europe that we have come to call the ‘Reformation’. Theologians such as Martin Luther in Germany, and Ulrich Zwingli and later John Calvin in Switzerland, protested against what they saw as abuses in the Roman Church (hence the term ‘Protestant’).

The Early Reformation in England

In England, the creation of an independent national church was directly powered by political events. In 1527 Henry VIII attempted to obtain a divorce from Katherine of Aragon. When the Pope would not comply, Henry adopted a solution suggested by his advisor Thomas Cromwell that he take the title of ‘Supreme Head of the English Church’. Monasteries were forcibly disbanded and images and shrines were destroyed (in attacks known as iconoclasm). Henry’s Roman Catholic Lord Chancellor, Thomas More, who had refused to accept Henry’s supremacy of the church, was executed and the Bible appeared in English for the first time.

However, it was not until the accession of the boy king Edward VI that the English Protestant Reformation touched the lives of the people of the realm more widely. Under a protectorate of Protestant nobles, significant religious reforms were executed in the king’s name. A Book of Common Prayer was issued in English and over the period 1547–1553 the structure of church ceremonies was simplified. The appearance of parish churches continued to be drastically transformed; communion tables replaced altars, images were removed, the king’s royal arms were installed and walls once filled with paintings were whitewashed.
Return to Roman Catholicism under Mary I

There was an abrupt halt to reform with the accession of the Roman Catholic Mary I. In 1553 Queen Mary appointed Cardinal Pole as Archbishop of Canterbury and the Catholic Mass was reintroduced. Many Protestant clerics left England to study abroad. Others, such as Thomas Cranmer, who was responsible for the first Protestant *Book of Common Prayer*, were accused of treason and executed.

Religious Reform under Elizabeth I

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 she reversed Mary’s Roman Catholic policies. As the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, whose marriage caused the original break with Rome, Elizabeth has been described as the ‘literal and biological product’ of the Reformation. She may have been destined to uphold the Protestant faith, but the less ardent version of reform she introduced reflected her desire to attain unity with people of varying religious outlooks. As a consequence, the Elizabethan Church pleased neither extreme Protestants nor Roman Catholics. The Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer* were republished in English and Queen Elizabeth adopted the title of ‘Supreme Governor of the English Church’.

How far, and how quickly people in England and Wales adopted the reformed religion is a matter still debated today. Some parts of England, such as Kent and Devon, enthusiastically supported reform while other places, like Yorkshire, retained strong groups of those loyal to the Roman Catholic faith. Yet, as a result of the relative prosperity and stability that the country experienced under Elizabeth I, the Protestant religion slowly became an accepted part of life in England and Wales.